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Kawasaki







B A B E L

BY

HUGH MACNAIR KAHLER

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To

MARGARET TORBERT MacNAIR KAHLER

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BABEL

I

THE clouds which floated whitely above the stacks drew Matthew Trafford's eyes. They were little clouds, woolly and shining in the slant of the morning sun, and they made Trafford think of children, tubbed and starched and spotless, venturing joyfully on forbidden ground. The clear cobalt sky beyond and above them increased his sense of impropriety, affront. There was no room for clean little clouds and open sky where the mill stacks lifted from the ranks of low brick buildings and serrated glass roofs. Both seemed to trespass impudently, mocking the impotence which clutched him, malicious and witless as the sudden paralysis of strong muscles. They harmonized with the stillness which lay over the mills like an invisible, suffocating blanket, a silence infinitely more disturbing than the wonted clamour of the shops.

Distracted by the unwholesome brooding qui-

etude, Matthew Trafford's mind refused to focus on his problem. He struggled against a persistent diffusion of attention. He must think somehow—think straight and fast. It wasn't as if there was someone else with whom to take counsel. This was his affair, his only. Not even the men at the chamber of commerce—his lips twisted at the thought of them, intimidated, pacific, wagging their heads and urging compromise. He straightened his shoulders suddenly, his own defiant impulse stiffened by the memory of those flabby frightened weaklings.

The first thing was to protect the mills. There would be no trouble for a day or two while the men enjoyed their holiday and ate up their wages. But after that—a kind of terror woke at the thought of what might happen to the plant at the hands of two or three thousand fools, led by two or three rascals. The wire barriers wouldn't stop a rush. There must be men to do that, men with sawed-off shotguns and the will to use them. Militia would be less effective than guards of the professional type. He crossed quickly to his desk and spoke into the telephone. He'd get into touch with McKenna, of the Employers' Service, over the long distance, and arrange for a couple of hundred

special guards. At the worst of it the mills would be safe.

As he replaced the receiver the sound of a turned latch startled him. He wheeled abruptly, tense with the wakened fear of an attack—not a personal, physical danger to himself, but a threat against the wired glass and intricate machinery which were more intimately a part of him than his flesh. The tension smoothed gratefully under Margaret Patton's quiet eyes. He had a stab of shame for his alarm.

"A committee," she announced levelly—"Mr. Donaldson, Mr. Perry, and Mr. Wolff. I thought you'd see them."

"Yes."

He had bristled at the first word, fancying that it referred to a delegation from the men. These fellows would only beg him to surrender, as they had begged him last night. Donaldson, with his installment furniture in half the cottages along the river; Perry, aghast at the thought of no customers for his restaurants; Wolff, anxious lest his sales of silk shirts and three-dollar neckties be diminished. White mice, these. He felt a compassionate contempt for them as they filed in, patently afraid of him under their air of importance. He jerked his

BABEL

hand carelessly toward chairs, nodding his greetings. They sat, exchanging glances of encouragement. Donaldson was the spokesman.

"We represent the chamber of commerce, Mr. Trafford," he announced. "After our informal conference last night the executive committee talked it all over, and we came to the conclusion that the best thing would be to compromise. The town can't afford a strike."

"Bad for the installment business, eh?" Matthew Trafford was vaguely puzzled at his hostility. Donaldson, plump and soft and pompous, irritated him suddenly. "That's your trouble—all of you. You can't see anything but your own pockets. You make money faster when my men are overpaid. Never occurs to you that I have to find the money to pay them with."

"The town can't afford a strike, you say? What do you mean by the town? The men? They can afford it all right. They're bragging that they've got funds for a three-month lay-off. Or perhaps you mean Donaldson and Perry and Wolff, eh?"

"We mean the whole community," said Perry with a touch of spirit. "You don't realize that as far as business is concerned the mills are the town.

Everybody in Trafford depends on the mill payroll. When that stops we all stop."

"Glad you see that, anyway," Trafford chuckled. "Because it's come to the point of deciding, once for all, whether the mills close or go on. These demands would mean a loss on every tire we ship. It's a choice between winning this strike and putting up the shutters. And if you fellows have got that far toward the facts, there's a chance that you'll finally see where you stand and help me instead of whining about a dull week or two. But I don't need you. I can fight this out alone, and I'm going to. That's final."

The three emissaries consulted with aggrieved eyes. Wolff spread his hands in an eloquent gesture of helplessness, tilting his head to one side. Donaldson returned to the argument, his voice sullen now.

"In other words, you're ready to bankrupt the rest of us for the sake of your own profits," he declared. "You'd rather ruin Trafford than reduce your own——"

"I've just told you that there's no question of profits. If I grant these demands I'll lose money on every tire."

"Oh, come, we're all business men here!" Wolff

grinned. "Boost your prices a little, like all the rest."

"Pass the buck to the consumer, eh?" Trafford spoke evenly. "That's the easy way out—for almost everybody. But it won't do in my case. I'm selling in competition with manufacturers who can cut my costs from five to twenty per cent. and still show profits. On quality I've managed to get a shade more than most of them or I'd have gone under long ago. I know my market, gentlemen. Another penny on my prices and my sales won't drop—they'll stop."

He saw that they did not believe him.

"Trafford's no place for manufacturing," he went on, faintly amused at their stupidity. "I have a longer haul on rubber and cotton than the Akron factories; my coal costs me a dollar a ton more than they pay; and I'm farther from my market, on top of that. The one item which has kept me in the running is the labour cost. I've had a bit the best of that so far. Now you ask me to pay more than any other tire maker in the world. It can't be done."

Again he was conscious of disbelief. These men, in his place, would have lied. They were accordingly convinced that he was lying. Perry, slight

and undersized, voiced what was clearly the common attitude:

"If Trafford's such a rotten factory site, it's funny you picked it out. There wasn't anything here when you started. You could have gone anywhere."

"Yes, I could have, but I didn't. And because I didn't, because I located here and fought my way through the bad days, there's a city here now—a city big enough to have a chamber of commerce, and to support a profitable department store for Donaldson, and a string of eating places for Perry, and a plate-glass haberdashery for Wolff. And if I go under it won't be long before Donaldson and Perry and Wolff will be there with me. Don't forget that."

Wolff snickered.

"If I don't go bankrupt till after you do, Mr. Trafford, I wouldn't worry. What worries me is that maybe I go first. I ain't got behind me what you got."

Trafford understood that he aimed at flattery in this arch disbelief, the sort of flattery which would have been effectual in his own ears. He checked an impulse to put the truth before them, to make them understand how near the edge he stood.

What use? They couldn't help him, but they might hinder. Even cowards can whisper. Let them cling to their conviction that he stood for nothing but an undiminished profit for himself. They could understand that at least. Each of them would fight for his pocket's sake. He became suddenly aware of the basic difference between himself and these others—the essential contrast which had eluded him till now.

They built nothing. Each in his own way, they waited for stronger men to create, spying for a chance to profit when the task was done, without the toil and strain and turmoil of construction. Trafford's prosperity had drawn them here; they had not helped to make it. He rose abruptly, impatient of their presence.

"There's no use in discussing it. I told you last night that I was going to fight this out to a finish. That stands. I'm going to break this strike so small that nobody'll ever try to put the pieces back together. I don't want any help and I won't take any hindrance. The man who gets in the way is going to get hurt—that's all. If you and your pussy-foot crowd of profiteers don't like it you can say so. That's your privilege, but it won't get you anything."

"Very well." Donaldson wrapped a pursy dignity about a bruised self-importance. "We've tried to warn you. If you'd be reasonable we'd stand with you to compel a just compromise. But this attitude means that you're against us as well as the men. You'll regret it, Mr. Trafford. No man is big enough to fight a whole community."

"That depends on the community—and the man," Matthew Trafford laughed. "I built this town of yours with my two hands, and I'm able to run anything I ever built. And if I can't run it, perhaps I can break it. There's something to think about, Donaldson. Good-morning."

The telephone signal hummed softly. He lifted the receiver, deliberately ignoring their presence. He had forgotten the long-distance call in his wakened joy of conflict. The wires smoothed into silence and a rasping abrupt voice came to him.

"McKenna speaking."

"How soon can you deliver two hundred special guards at Trafford? I want men who won't be afraid to shoot."

McKenna pleased him by revealing an accurate knowledge of the situation. A glow of fellow-feeling warmed him toward the man at the other end of three hundred miles of wire, blunt and

forceful and competent. He took pains to make the tenor of their brief interview clear to the listening three. As he rang off he faced them happily.

"You're at liberty to spread the news. I'll have the mills under guard after tomorrow morning. There won't be any broken windows to replace when this is over. That's all."

He felt better when the door closed on them. After all, without intending it, they had helped him. Their counsel had been just the provocation he had needed. He knew now that he would win. There was none of the weariness, the depression of last night, left in him. He pressed a button inset in the wide desk and, after his fixed habit, began to dictate as Margaret Patton entered.

"That's all," he said presently. As she rose a dim consciousness of something unfamiliar in her aspect came to him. "A moment," he checked her half-way to the door.

She turned, her eyes meeting his evenly. She seemed in some indefinable fashion to convey a disapproval. He felt a slow, wounding irritation. If this woman stood against him, too—the thought made him aware of the degree to which he had come to depend on her. As far as he could delegate his burdens and responsibilities, she was in some

sense his only lieutenant. No one else stood very close to his confidence.

"You—you don't think I can beat them, Margaret?"

The tone was personal, almost pleading. He felt a strange suspense as he waited for her response. Her opinion was worth having for its own sake, but it was something else he wanted from her, something distinct from advice, suggestion. A need of supporting loyalty, of sympathy, woke in him.

"I'm quite sure that you can," she told him. "You don't realize how strong your position is. You can win in a week if you use all your advantage."

The words delighted him. His contempt for the opinions of other people did not extend to Margaret Patton's ideas. She had a quality of caution in her speech with which he was respectfully familiar. And she knew his affairs almost as intimately as he knew them himself. If she felt so sure of success—he checked an exuberant restatement of his intent. His ear detected a want of enthusiasm in her voice. He hesitated, studying her gravely.

She faced him, a tall, erect figure, with a kind of pliant solidity suggested in her poise. She made

him think of a tall, slender tree, willing to bend, but firmly and deeply rooted below the seeming complaisance. He found himself analyzing her face, confronted for the first time in their relation with an inner question concerning its claim to beauty. There had been no time or place for softness in his life; women interested him only when they impinged on his considerations of business and then only as possible factors in business equations. Now, strangely, he wondered whether, after all, Margaret Patton was homely.

He had been comfortably sure that she was. Pretty women, in his experience, made poor employees, concerned inevitably with masculine admiration, and predestined to marry when they should have been yielding dividends of efficiency on the investment of their schooling. If Margaret Patton had impressed him as even feebly pleasing to the eye he would not have taken her so far into his inner confidences. He had assured himself when David Patton died that Margaret would develop into one of those modern old maids who devote to business all the passions and hopes and hungers which other women divide between husbands and homes and children. Her willingness—in the absence of any pressing need—to enter his

service had seemed to him to argue that she would stay there. Business to her would be something more than a way of earning money, employment for empty hours. He had felt a sense of accomplishment in securing her.

So far she had justified this. She had neither sacrificed nor intruded her individuality, but rather formed it to complement his own. Without command she saw to an infinitude of detail, freeing him for broader work, and yet when circumstance brought her management of trivialities before him in review, he saw invariably that she had acted as he would have acted. Driven and harassed, he found an abiding comfort in the sense of her permanence. And this permanence, when he considered it, was a corollary of her appearance. She wasn't the marrying sort, he had thought; she'd stay where she was till she died. Now quite suddenly a disturbing doubt woke in him. He surveyed her, conscious of her grey, unwavering eyes, troubled to discover in her thus tardily an appeal almost amounting to charm. Below the inconsequent speculation his major thought pursued its course. He laughed shortly.

"Oh, I know my position pretty well, Margaret."

She did not answer except for a slight change of

her expression. He felt a reservation on her part and yielded to a rare impulse of self-justification.

"You don't think so, eh? I'll show you. What I missed last night was the outside interests. They looked like just so many additional liabilities at first, but I've got the right line on them now. The mills won't make any money for a long time, but I can afford that as long as I own the gas works and the power plant and the rest. They'll bring in plenty of money—in cash too. People have got to use gas and electricity, no matter how much they hate me. They've got to buy ice and ride on the trolleys."

She did not answer this either. He chuckled.

"Funny thing, Margaret. I didn't go into those outside investments for profit. I—I thought they'd all show me losses. I—"

"You meant them as a gift to the town." She spoke quietly. "I understood that of course."

He opened his eyes.

"You understood? I don't, Margaret. What do you mean by all that?"

"It's all quite evident, isn't it? You didn't start the mills in Trafford to make money. You had a better reason even then. And these other things—the water supply and the electric lights

and all—are just part of the same plan. You meant to build a city."

He felt himself flushing like a boy detected in some stealthy benefaction. An impulse to deny the charge stirred and subsided. Suddenly it needed sharing, that secret of his. It would be a relief to discuss it with somebody after all these years. He had put it into words often enough in his own thoughts—to build a city. He had meant to do just that with the quiet old village which shared the name of Trafford. And he had done it—done it better than even his dreams had hoped.

"I didn't know you'd guessed that." He spoke almost shyly. "How did you? I thought——"

"I knew." She shrugged. "You aren't a money grabber like the rest. I've seen enough here in the mills to understand that. It wasn't difficult to put one and one together."

He felt an expansion of spirit.

"Well, I've done it, haven't I? When I came back from Cuba in '98 there were four thousand people in Trafford. There must be nearly forty thousand now." A touch of pride warmed his voice. "You can remember what it was like, can't you? The hitching posts along Main Street, where the farmers used to tie their teams on Satur-

days, the mud and the dust and the deadness, two trains a day, and a crowd in the post office after each of 'em. Different now."

"Yes," she nodded.

He caught a light in the grey eyes, a softening glow which puzzled him.

"Yes, it is different. You've built your city."

"You've helped, Margaret. I couldn't have done it without you."

He rose, moved by a reproaching realization of her share in the accomplishment. She drew back a step.

"Yes," she said soberly, "I suppose I deserve that. I've helped." Her voice changed abruptly. "I'll send Mr. Matsen over to see about the coal for the power plant. He'll be glad to have something to do."

"Good idea. Keep him busy all you can or he'll bother us both."

He nodded in dismissal and she moved away. Alone he went back to the window and looked out across the mill roofs to the city sprawling on the slant of the low hill. It was his, he thought. He straightened his shoulders. Matt Trafford could hold what he had built.

"I'll show them," he said aloud. "The rats!"

II

"LET's get this perfectly clear. I don't like the way you talk, Pryzak. I want to know whether you're with me or against me, once for all."

The mayor spread his hands. Matthew Trafford remembered that gesture. It had given him the key to Pryzak's character at their first interview eight years before, when the lawyer had come to him with a trumped-up accident claim against the mills. They had dealt with each other rather often since then, and Trafford's contempt for politics had deepened as he watched Pryzak's rising influence. A trade of lies and liars. It suited his convenience to lend a hand to the liar with whom he could be sure of dealing effectually. When Pryzak ran for mayor against old Paul Doniphan, Trafford had taken a sort of pride in throwing his aid toward the pettifogging shyster who knew which side of his bread was buttered and by whom. He hadn't had any trouble with Pryzak; old Doniphan would have bothered him to the point of frenzy with his academic theories of municipal

government. Pryzak had always come obediently to heel without even a whistle. But today there was a visible difference in the fellow's attitude that was disquieting.

"I'm with you of course." Pryzak's sallow face twisted uneasily. "But I've got to consider the town too."

"The town?" Trafford laughed. "That's me—you know it better than most."

"You don't get me." The mayor wagged his head. "I meant the people—the community at large. Your interests—"

"My interests are all that matters—to Trafford. I'm responsible for its existence and you know it. The mills support it. Every man and woman and child in it is living on my pay-rolls. If it hadn't been for me you wouldn't be here—you and all the rest of them. If I go under the town goes with me. There's no two ways to that. If you want to consider the community, consider Matthew Trafford. I'm the community—in all that matters."

"There's a lot in that, of course." Pryzak was obviously eager to agree. "It's really your interest I'm thinking about, for that matter. It's true in a sense that you're the community. That's why I'm trying to protect you "

"Protect me? You? That's funny, Pryzak." Trafford laughed. "Do you think your little police force would be any good in a pinch like this? Why, a mob would eat them up. I'm protecting myself, thanks. I've got a squad of McKenna's men on their way right now. They'll do all the protecting that's needed, thanks."

"I know. Donaldson 'phoned me. That's why I came right over. I'm afraid to have those men here, Mr. Trafford. They'll mean trouble—bad trouble."

"That's what I'm paying them for—to mean as much trouble as they can to anybody who meddles with my property. They're better than police. They haven't got any brothers-in-law or second cousins in the mob. They won't be afraid to shoot."

"That's it. They're outsiders, and the men are always ugly when——"

"Outsiders! That's good! What are the strikers themselves? Riffraff swept out of half the ash heaps in Europe's back alleys. I ought to know. I've spent the best part of a hundred thousand in the last four years just for bringing them in here. Outsiders!"

"Strangers, then." Pryzak shook his head again. "There's a difference anyway. The po-

lice live here. The men know them. As you said yourself, there will be relatives of theirs in the other crowd. That helps to avoid trouble—both ways. I wish you'd keep your gunmen out of town, Mr. Trafford—for your own sake."

Trafford laughed.

"Sorry, but I can't take any risks. I've got too much at stake to count on your home-breds."

"We'll have trouble then. It's playing right into the hands of the agitators. By tonight they'll be ranting about your hired butchers in every strike meeting. So far the men aren't ugly. This will stir them up better than anything else you can do."

"I'm willing. We've come to a showdown, Pryzak. If we can't settle this question without burning some gunpowder, we'll settle it that way. I can stand it if they can."

The mayor rose, unconvinced and plainly worried. Trafford had a careless touch of compassion for him—a rat facing a bull-dog's job. Even old Doniphan would have met this crisis better than this fellow, with his talent for hidden wires and sly cowardice. He saw Pryzak to the door. In the very pose of his back he could read a confession. Pryzak would stand by him only as long as he was

more afraid of Matthew Trafford than of a mob of fools. It didn't matter. With him or against him Pryzak was negligible in such a time as this.

He came back to the window and stood looking out over his town, his hands crossed behind him. The clean sky and the lazy, shining clouds no longer offended him. Somehow they were friendly now, nudging forgotten memories into life. They made him think of summer afternoons with his fishing rod and the old, stiff-kneed setter, when the brook had whimpered between arched willows, and there had been open fields where the mills stood now. He thought inconsequently of the blurred sky line of those days—a nestling congregation of elms and maples, with a spire or two showing above them, and here and there a glimpse of friendly chimneys or a roof.

He grinned feebly as the Trafford of his boyhood came again before his mind's eye; the sleepy stretch of Main Street flanked by the brick blocks and the hitching posts, the loungers in the post office nodding to his father as he unlocked the family box, the picket fences and the lawns behind them and the painted wooden houses set in their gardens.

He had changed all that. Trafford was alive now—alive and big and busy, thanks to him.

He slipped into an unwonted self-pity. Small thanks he got for it all, for the dream out of which he had wrought reality, for the vision which had seen into the future, glimpsed the possibilities of rubber and cotton fibre molded and woven into magic carpets for the traffic of the world, for the twenty years of labour which had built the mills and kept them running. They hated him for it—even the remnant of the old stock, whose homesteads had multiplied in value through his industry and wits—the Doniphans and Tylers and Cookes, whose roots struck as deeply into the red soil as his own. He had built them a city in place of the drowsing village he had found—paved their streets and laid trolley tracks in them, dammed Clear Creek back in the hills and piped its waters into their stiff, creaking houses, given them electricity and gas, while they watched and criticized and grumbled. They might have thanked him, he thought, with a sense of grievance. He'd earned that much. Instead they hated him. He had always been conscious of this, but today as he confronted a new enmity more menacing and positive than their dislike he envisioned his unpopularity in a new light.

It was natural enough for the alien rabble to

hate him. There would always be antagonism and distrust between those who laboured with their hands and those who hired their toil. And these outlanders, with their background of oppression, learned hate at the breast. He bore them no keen malice. They were fools of course—blind to their own advantage, the dupes and tools of slack-jawed, mud-headed zealots who screamed at them from soap boxes and cart tails, but he would as readily have blamed a pig for setting its feet in its trough as to blame these simpletons for snatching at the chance of a greater wage for a lesser tribute of work. He would starve them back to something like sense in due time. That was simple enough. But the others—the old stock, men and women of his own race and blood and traditions—these suddenly presented a problem of which he had not been more than dimly aware.

He was forty-three. It came home to him with a shock that his best years had been given to his work. In a few more he would be old, on the downward slope of life. And in the city he had built, the community he called home, there was no man or woman he might name as friend.

He had never taken time to contemplate this truth. Always the hours had been too few and

full for the things which must be done. Now, as he caught the infection of peace and leisure from the open sky and the silent, empty mill yard, he realized his solitude with a sense of catastrophe. He had built a city, yes. And he dwelt in it now more alone than in a desert.

An instinct of self-justification imposed itself on his thought. It wasn't his fault. They hadn't caught the spirit of the age, those deliberate, slow-thinking townsmen. He'd had to lean on outsiders—men who could think fast and straight and work on their nerve. And between these newcomers and the old village, inevitably in conflict, he had been constrained to choose as allies those who served his need. He would have preferred to work with his neighbours, to lift them as he climbed, instead of enriching strangers, but he had been given no choice. The fault was theirs, not his, he told himself.

He shook off the mood with an effort almost physical. Matthew Trafford wasting time in being sorry for himself! He turned away from the window and went back to his desk carrying a picture of the Trafford he had created—the treeless stretch of walls and roofs and pavement, the swaying progress of a trolley car coasting down the

slant toward the mills, the rows of wooden shanties on the low flats along the stream. It quickened his reviving pride of creation. In spite of the vacant mill yards and the smokeless stacks, Trafford was a city—his city.

"Yes, and I'll live to build it twice as big," he told himself as he plunged into his work. "This is just the beginning."

The old compelling dream repossessed him. He brushed the strike out of the path of his thought as a negligible and trifling incident. The afternoon fled. He was startled when Margaret Patton brought him his letters at five. She waited while he signed them.

"Your car's waiting," she told him as he thrust the pile back across the desk. He shook his head.

"I'm going to stay here tonight. Tell Joe to take the car home and have Gabe pack a bag for me. Wait a minute, Margaret—while this thing's on you'd better use the car yourself. Joe will call for you in the morning."

"Thank you." She took the offer calmly. "There are some pickets at the office gates, you know. Some of the girls are worried."

He frowned, his fists closing. That was their

measure—hanging about to frighten women! He considered briefly.

"We'll settle that easily enough. Tell the office that while the strike lasts the company will provide busses. Telephone to Gonfarone's and have him send down as many cars as you'll need. They can drive in through Number Four gate. Hold the girls till they get here."

She nodded. He watched her go, his earlier curiosity reviving. Something in her face baffled him utterly. It made her almost—almost attractive. And yet he was queerly certain that she was against him like all the rest. She would not help his enemies, but she wanted them to win. He tried to persuade himself that this abiding conviction was pure fancy, but an intuition more compelling than logic overbore his arguments. A grey depression settled upon him. Not even Margaret Patton stood behind him in this quarrel—a quarrel in which he fought for the life of the city which had turned on its creator.

He carried the thought with him through what remained of the day. It harassed him as he superintended the measures of defense, posting a handful of loyal foremen at the vulnerable points, connecting fire hose to the high-pressure hydrants.

It troubled him while he presided at a conference of his lieutenants—Searing, who ran the electric plant; McCall, manager of the gas works; Lanning and Mitchell, of the street railway; and Gerrish, of the water system. He knew that he could count on their loyalty, but he sensed below this assurance their pessimistic view of the situation. None of them was more than a dependable subordinate. He had chosen them for their ability to take orders.

"We'll keep things going as long as we can," said Lanning, speaking for them all. "But they'll hit at us before long. They know we're all working for you. I hope you'll get it straightened out before they tie us all up, sir."

Trafford made light of his fears. But the suggestion deepened his depression. If the strike extended to his lesser interests he would go down. He had no reserve to meet the strain of a long fight. His eagerness to build had always kept him balanced on the edge of financial disaster. Every dollar of profit had been reinvested before it was fairly earned—invested always in Trafford and in enterprises from which conservative capital quite reasonably held back. By diverting current revenue from the trolleys and the power plants he could manage to keep the mills solvent for an

interval of idleness. Wanting that income, the major business would infallibly crash. And the men who had fathered the strike were clever enough to see this as clearly as he saw it.

A little before midnight McKenna's men arrived. A string of tourist sleepers carried them into the yards on the mill's own tracks without interference on the part of the straggling pickets. Their presence gave Matthew Trafford a sense of security. They obviously knew their trade—some of them, he fancied, enjoyed it. They had the calm, placid look of man-killers, the direct, opaque eye of their craft. He watched the process of distributing them about the defences, reassured against the fear of physical destruction. Afterward he slept uneasily on the cot he kept at the office. Trafford was safe for the present.

III

A FEELING of peace came into the room with Margaret Patton. He looked up, aware once more of the challenging change in her. She carried a tray with a bowl of soup and a little pile of sandwiches.

"You'd better have something to eat," she announced. "Going without food can't possibly do any good to anybody."

He checked an impatient refusal. Under her sober eyes he suddenly sensed the boyish folly of his self-starvation. The clear broth tempted him. He finished it and the generous bread and meat.

"That's better," she told him. "I sent out for it. A hungry man isn't normal. And this job needs sanity, Mr. Trafford."

Her tone soothed him. He felt a restful lessening of the tight pull at his nerves. His hand fumbled for his cigarette case. He had not even smoked during these last twenty-four hours. She nodded approval, lifting the tray from the desk. He stopped her with a gesture.

"Don't go, Margaret. Stay and—and talk to me. If I'm alone I think—hard."

She obeyed placidly. A cross light brought her face into profile. Again he found himself seeking to analyze the unfamiliar quality of her. She sat with her hands crossed in her lap, her body effortlessly erect, at ease. A silence fell between them, broken at last by Trafford's explosive speech.

"Margaret, they're going to beat me. I can't see a way out. It's a choice between smashing after I surrender or smashing first. Either way, it's the end of Trafford."

"Do you mind very much?"

Her question amazed him. Did he mind! Twenty-two years—all his best, his dreams, his youth, his strength, all wasted! And she could ask him, as casually as if it were an affair of pennies, whether he minded!

"A little," he said dryly. "You see, Margaret, it isn't just Matthew Trafford who's going under. That wouldn't bother me much. It's—well, you guessed, the other day. I haven't been chasing money all these years. I—I've clung to a fool idea that I was building up something that would be—oh, a monument, I suppose. And that hurts."

"I wondered." She surveyed him steadily.

"I thought perhaps that you might have seen a new side since this trouble came. You've said some things which sounded as if you'd discovered this city you've built for what it is, instead of the air castles you've been dreaming all these years. A city? What does the word mean—to you? Just—just bigness, people, noise, hustle?"

He frowned.

"That's all part of it, of course. Growth and development mean noise and hurry. That's life. I suppose that's why they don't like me, though—the old-timers. They'd rather have had the place stand still—stagnate. I didn't realize that you felt the same way about it. You've certainly helped me make it what it is. I couldn't have done it without you. I see that more and more clearly these days."

"I've helped you, of course. You paid me for that. But I haven't made you understand what I meant. You've created something. We call it a city. The name doesn't matter. The point is, do you like it? Is it worth fighting for, as you've been fighting for it these last few days? That puzzles me."

He was bewildered.

"Like it? Why not? What's wrong with it? Forty thousand population—ten times as many as

we had when I began—everything that any town of twice our size could ask for. Why, there are dozens of bigger places that can't compare with Trafford!"

"I didn't mean the—the material things—water and electricity and the rest. I was thinking more about the people. There were only a few of us when you were building the first shop, but—don't you see the difference between the few you found and the many you've brought? We—we belonged here and we belonged together; we'd taken root. Trafford meant—meant something to us that it doesn't mean to these aliens you've imported. Can you imagine a boy born in one of those shanties on River Alley growing up with a dream like yours? I can't!"

He laughed.

"I see now. I suppose the Indians felt that way when the first settlers came up the river. It's natural enough, but it's wrong. Give these people a generation or two and their roots will go down as deep as ours. Why shouldn't they? It's the same country—a better country than my great-grandfather found when he hewed out his clearing over there on the bank. He didn't have any trolleys; his children didn't ride to high school and

study their books by electric lights. And yet he did pretty well, considering. That's all poppycock. We're all aliens when you look the facts in the face. Some of us have been here a bit longer than others, that's all."

She nodded.

"Yes, but those who came first came slowly and paid high for their coming. They left the easy places behind them, and if they weren't strong and stubborn and hard they died young. Nobody met them as they filed off their ships and paid their railroad fare. I wonder if the men you've brought here can leave their children what you and I inherited? I'm not so sure. If I were I'd want you to win this fight."

He started.

"And you don't want me to, now? You mean that?"

Her eyes softened, but her lips were firm.

"Yes, if winning means that you're to go on with all this. I'd rather you lost now; I'd rather see all you've done disintegrate; I'd rather see these—these personally conducted immigrants of yours go through something of the same refining process that smelted out the slag in the old stock. I don't see any chance of making them over by charity."

"Oh, come, Margaret! You can't turn back the clock. The pioneer days are gone. This is an age of organization. The same basic law applies, though. The fittest come to the top, the weak go under. You can't repeal Nature."

"We're doing our best, though." She leaned forward, resting her chin on her palm, an elbow on the arm of her chair. "Perhaps you're right. I don't know. I wish I could be sure, because——"

She stopped, and her eyes for the first time evaded his. He detected something vital in her interrupted speech.

"Why? What would you do?" He got to his feet, crossing toward her.

"I—I'd tell you how to win," she said simply. "It's quite easy. But I'm afraid—sometimes I think it's all part of some big, natural process, all this sudden madness. I'm afraid to interfere. Whom the gods would destroy, you know. Perhaps we're getting back to the old unrelenting law of the survival of the fittest. What is it that all these men are trying to pull down? What do they mean when they rant about a capitalistic system as if it were a personal devil? Isn't it just the system which vetoes the primary principle of life—the system which protects the weakling and his

children and lets him govern the strong? They think they're tearing down something oppressive, but aren't they really attacking what lets them live? Suppose you hadn't built your mills—where would your forty thousand be? What would they be doing? Have you ever thought of that?"

"I didn't have to think. They'd be in somebody else's factory. I had to fight hard enough to get them. You're absolutely wrong, Margaret. Co-operation is as much a part of the natural scheme as sunlight. Ants and bees——"

"I know. But ants and bees haven't changed very much in the years which have brought us up from the ooze. Something better than that produced your greatgrandfather—and mine. But I don't know—I don't know. I wish I could be sure one way or the other. And I'm afraid——"

It maddened him to realize that success or failure of all his life work might conceivably lie in her keeping. He knew her habit of cautious speech too well to take her declaration lightly. If she saw a way out of the closing trap it would be practical and feasible at least.

"Trust my judgment," he urged. "Let me decide. If you see a chance of winning through—why, Margaret, don't you see what it means to me?

Whatever happens to Trafford and the people in it, I'll be done. I'm forty-three. I'll never make another start if I fail now. Everything I've done, everything I've slaved and schemed for all my life is gone if I don't break this strike this week. Are you going to let me go down for the sake of a fancy? Tell me what you'd do——"

He felt her eyes measuring him as if she weighed the risk of putting a weapon into his hands. He was amazed at the breathless tension in which he waited. After all, it would be some fantastic woman's notion. Absurd to behave as if she held the keys of Fate, and yet below his doubts an abiding certainty sustained him. She knew!

"I'll tell you then." Her voice sounded harsh. He saw her lips tighten and draw straight as if speech cost her a price of pain. "The utilities—the gas and water and lights——"

He flung his hands wide.

"Oh, if that's all—why, you know how they've worked out! There's no surplus revenue in any of them. I had to cut into the reserve to meet the pay-rolls this week. They're running at a loss."

"Yes, you're spending money you desperately need to keep them running, so that your strikers can have water for the turning of a tap, cook their

food on your gas, hold their meetings under your electric lamps! Why don't you shut down—let them carry water from the river if they want it—walk instead of riding—hold their precious meetings in the dark? Give them a taste of what this country was when our race found it. If they stand fast there's stuff in them that would beat you anyway. But they won't. You know they won't."

He stared at her, stunned. Their own weapon turned against them! A sharp laugh fought its way to his lips. His mind leaped to the consequences. How they would squeal! He tasted the triumph in anticipation. She was right—they were soft, these people; helpless to do for themselves the simplest of the vital daily tasks; dependent on the wits and labour of the men they hated and fought for their drink and food and shelter. One day without their luxurious necessities and they would whine and beg like well-whipped dogs. He felt his lips draw back from his teeth.

"You've won for us," he said in a strained whisper. "I believe you've put your finger on the answer to the whole problem. Cut off their supplies and they're beaten, and—the world around—capital controls the vital things. Margaret.

you've done a bigger thing than you think. We're fighting the last strike—right here in Trafford. And it's almost over. There'll never be another—not with an outside chance of winning." He stopped. Her hands, which somehow he had seized, were cold and passive, and the look in her eyes frightened him. "Don't worry—it's all right. You've done more for them than you have for me. You've kept them from killing the golden goose."

"I know. That's it. I wonder—I wonder if it wouldn't have been better to let them kill it. Better for them, I mean"—her voice changed queerly—"and better for—for the golden goose too."

He scarcely heard her. Already he was at the telephone calling impatiently for Searing at the lighting plant. He held the whip after all. Below a surging joy of victory he warmed with a glow of gratitude toward the woman who had thrust it into his hands.

"I'll owe this to you, Margaret," he said over his shoulder. "I don't forget."

IV

"You can't go through with it." Pryzak's voice shook with a kind of terror. "It's all right to bluff, but you can't do it if they call you. You don't realize——"

"You don't, you mean. You can't get it out of your head that I'm fighting for profits, Pryzak. You're as bad as the simple fools who think I'm getting rich on their labour. It's not Matthew Trafford I'm thinking about; it's the town—these jackasses themselves. If I let them break me they'll suffer before I do. And without the mills—why, Trafford won't last a year! I'm fighting for you and your crowd—for those weak-backed idiots at the chamber of commerce."

"It doesn't matter. Cut off their water and gas and we'll have red hell here in three hours. They've been getting uglier ever since the word went out. There's a meeting called for tonight—Smolenski and Borkmeyer and that she-devil, Hilda Lang, will scream murder at them. They'll stampede, Trafford."

"Let them!" Trafford's glance moved to the slouching figures of McKenna's sentries just inside the gates. "We'll give them as good as we get." He laughed harshly. "I tell you, Pryzak, you're watching the dawn—we're through with strikes. Hereafter men will get what they earn, not what they can blackmail out of hamstrung employers. We've been fools—incredible fools—or we'd have found the answer years ago. While one man's hands hold him up and go through his pockets, the rest of us have calmly fed 'em and housed 'em and served 'em with all the modern conveniences. That's ended—tonight. After this you're going to see organization on our side. And when some crooked walking delegate calls a strike, his dupes will find themselves busy rustling coal and water and milk and ice without any help from the rest of the employing class. It's as simple as winking."

"You're missing a bet if you think that. You're playing straight into Borkmeyer's hands with that stunt. He doesn't want to win this strike. He's aiming for straight communism—no private property anywhere. Everything in the pool. You couldn't suit him better, because you're going to make me pull his chestnuts out of the fire. If you won't furnish water and gas and light I'll have to

seize your plants and see that they keep running—for the sake of the town."

"Try it!" Trafford laughed again. "Just try it!"

Pryzak spread his hands in the old expressive gesture.

"Suppose I don't? The governor will have troops here by tomorrow morning—put the place under martial law. And what'll be the first thing the soldiers do? I'll leave it to you if they won't commandeer your plants. They'll have to."

Trafford shook his head.

"Go right ahead and commandeer! I might put some of McKenna's men on guard and keep you out by force; I might get an injunction against you, but I won't. If you can run those plants without me you're welcome." He laughed. "Don't you think I'm sane enough to have foreseen that move, Pryzak? Until I'm ready there won't be gas or current or water in Trafford. There won't be a pound of ice or a turning trolley wheel. You can seize my plants, but you can't make 'em work. I've seen to that. Ever heard of sabotage? Well, I've adopted the principle. We've fixed the dynamos so it'll take a week to get them running unless we choose to replace the missing parts. The

pumps in the water plant are out of commission, and the reservoir will be empty in another hour. And it'll be a clever mechanic who can reassemble the gate valves in the gas mains. I'm ready for you! Go as far as you like!"

Pryzak's hands shook.

"Is that on the level?"

"Go and see for yourself! They'll let you inspect the plants. It's no use, Pryzak. I hold the cards. Go and tell your people to throw up the sponge. They're licked."

"I'll see what I can do. Maybe you can get by with it. But"—he shook his head—"I can feel trouble."

"Want a bit of good advice?" Again a pale compassion for the man woke in Matthew Trafford. Pryzak's political talents were pathetically unequal to red crises. "Send out a squad and round up Borkmeyer and Smolenski and the rest of 'em. Run 'em in on any charge you like and have Judge Morganstern give 'em half an hour to get out of town. That'll settle it."

"Maybe. I'll think about it."

The mayor departed, treading carefully on the toes of his shining boots. Trafford was contemptuously sorry for him. Next fall it would be a

good thing to put a real man in Pryzak's place—Mott Tyler perhaps, or even old Doniphant himself. He made a mental note to see to it when the time came. The strain of the preceding days and nights had lifted now. He relaxed, surrendering to a grateful certainty of success. The situation was saved, thanks to Margaret Patton.

His thought drifted comfortably toward her. Queer that she should have hit on the one device that could have rescued him! She wasn't in the least the ruthless, cold-blooded sort to think of such a method. He promised himself that when this fight was won he would study her a little. Perhaps she could be trained to take a larger measure of responsibility from his weighted shoulders. Anyway he'd have to find some method of squaring the account between them. If he pulled through he'd owe it absolutely to her.

Toward evening he made a round of inspection with Leary, McKenna's assistant. The guards had been reduced during the day, most of their number sleeping in the cars on the siding, to be fresh for the night's duty. Leary was at one with Pryzak in scenting action.

"We'll get busy before morning," he said as they

turned back toward the office building. "This stunt of yours'll start things moving."

It was plain that he enjoyed the prospect. And Matthew Trafford saw something of the same anticipation in the faces of the guards themselves.

"You act as if you hoped—" he began. Leary chuckled.

"I guess I do—sort of. It's a slow job, except when the lid blows off."

"Think you can handle 'em?"

Trafford was not concerned. He inquired merely to give the man the relief of speech. Leary grinned.

"Sure. We could always handle 'em if we had the right guy behind us. Trouble is that most owners want us to slap 'em on the wrist and speak real cross to 'em if they don't behave. Give me leave to start the music first and I'll show you results—every time. A shotgun with buck-shot makes a beautiful argument—if you shoot it soon enough."

Trafford said nothing. The professional attitude repelled him without weakening his determination. If they wanted blood they should have it. And yet as he glimpsed a vision of sprawled bodies tumbled before his gates he had a moment of

doubt. Cattle of course, but human cattle—immortal souls if the preachers had the right of it. A sense of inevitable and undeserved responsibility harassed him. He didn't want any right of high justice over these alien fools. All he wanted was to run his mills in peace. It wasn't fair to confront a man with such decisions in such a cause.

"Suppose they were too strong for you?" he heard himself asking. "Suppose they rushed the gates before you could stop them?"

"They won't!" Leary chuckled.

"But if they did, what about your men? They'd wipe you all out if they got to close quarters."

"Yes, but they won't. It's a funny thing about mobs: Any bull'll tell you the same thing. Lay your man out cold with one punch and his gang won't lift a finger. Leave him on his feet and his crowd piles right in on your neck. It's like that in these scraps. Stretch a couple of 'em before they're ready for it and the rest'll run like rabbits. I've been through it half a dozen times."

Trafford listened inattentively.

"But they do come on sometimes," he persisted. "And they'd have your men penned in here like mice in a trap. They'd wipe you out."

"No, we figure on that, o' course. There's the

train, and the engine's hooked onto her, with steam up. If we lost out we'd just make a rush of it for the cars and beat it. But don't worry. We'll be here in the morning—all of us."

Trafford left him at the office doorway. He looked in at Margaret Patton's desk as he passed her door. The room was empty. He was vaguely relieved. She must have taken his advice and gone home early. He ought not to let any of them come till the trouble quieted down. Even in the motor cars he had chartered they weren't wholly safe. A picket might fling a stone or take a chance shot. It didn't matter now. By tomorrow the danger would have passed. Pryzak was wrong—Leary too. The men wouldn't fight—not as men fight, anyway. If they'd been like the old stock, to be sure—it wouldn't have been safe to try starving Traffords or Cookes or Tylers into surrendering a cause they thought just. But these people—he shook his head in negation of the idea that they would turn to violence as their last resort.

He watched the night thicken over the town like a slow sediment sinking in a clear fluid. Often and often he had seen the day end from this same window, seen the yellow lights multiply and bright-

en as the sun faded; taken a builder's thrill of pride in them as so many symbols of success. Now as the twilight died the streets darkened. Here and there in the huddled buildings a spark revealed itself, accentuating the surrounding shadows. He found himself remembering such scattered lights as he had watched them from the hill years before. A kind of wistfulness tightened his throat and brought a stinging moisture to his eyes.

Friendly lights, those lamps and candles—tokens of warmth and comfort against the terrors of the dark. Every one of them had had a message for him in the old days. Now—he shook the mood from him, angry at himself for the descent into sticky sentiment. He tried to smoke, but his tightening nerves rejected the factitious solace. Nine o'clock. They would be listening to Borkmeyer now, shrieking his turgid lunacy in distorted English which their ears must strain to understand. A sudden impulse overpowered him. It would be dark, even with such makeshift illumination as they could manage. No one could recognize him if he kept in the shadows. Why not——

The sheer adventure of it tempted him. He found an old overcoat in the closet, a felt hat with a limp brim. The guard at the gate flashed an

electric torch in his face to verify his answer to the challenge. He went out into a deserted street, black with the almost palpable darkness of a country lane. Presently, guided by a sure instinct for distance and direction, he came within earshot of the meeting. They were holding it in the open—on the sand-lot where the next block of cottages would be built.

A crude platform had been put up. Gasoline torches flared and flickered at its corners. A harsh voice carried to him, its key eloquent before he could distinguish words. Borkmeyer! He made out the thick, almost deformed torso, the head set seemingly on the shoulders, the distorted features of the agitator, grimacing as he strained his vocal cords, the waving, uplifted fists.

Gradually his ear caught the thread of the man's frenzied clamour. He smiled thinly at the worn absurdities, pointed now because they were centred on himself.

"You wouldn't believe us when we told you you were slaves. Do you believe us now, when your master takes the lights out of the shanties he gives you to live in, lets your children cry for water, denies you the right to live unless you do his bidding? Will you wait till he sets up a whipping-post

and flogs you as his kind flogged you in the old days?"

He was faintly pleased at this. The blow had struck heavily, it seemed. Borkmeyer could scream himself speechless; the fact remained that Matthew Trafford ruled. They had chosen to appeal to the decision of strength. Let them make the best of it now that they knew he was strongest.

"What can you do? You ask me what you can do?" Borkmeyer flung his arms high. "I'll tell you. If you're men you'll take what's yours—take it and keep it. If you're slaves you'll crawl back on your bellies and kiss Matt Trafford's foot. What can you do? When there are five thousand of you—and only two hundred hired thugs against you! Take the mills! They're yours—you built them with your bloody sweat. Take them and keep them! Run them yourselves for your own profit! They're doing it in Russia. Why can't you do it here? Throw Trafford's paid butchers into the river and take what's yours!"

Trafford sensed the rising response in the crowd. He thought of a great sleeping beast slowly waking, moving its muscles experimentally, finding its strength. An impatient pity for the folly of the men who could be herded by the frothing maniac

under the torches gave way to a nascent fear. If they guessed that he stood here they would kill him with their hands, suffocate him as bees kill their drones, by the mere press of their crowding bodies. And suddenly he understood what Margaret Patton had meant.

These men were what he had made them—he and his kind. The law of Nature which would have sifted and sorted them had been suspended long enough to fashion them as he saw them now. Borkmeyer was right. They were slaves—in the sense that a higher intelligence shepherded them; fed and clad and housed them; set them to appointed tasks; gave them, unasked and undesired, the gifts for which free men struggle and sweat and die. And as water seeks eternally its levee, so whatever force lay behind this ferment of life rose against men's artifice. In their own despite these fatted cattle rebelled against the thing which protected them from the basic law.

It seemed to Matthew Trafford as if a mighty hand descended on him; as if some stern and unrelenting power overruled his will. A builder? Yes, like those nameless architects who had lifted their sun-baked brick terraces to scale heaven while their gods laughed. Babel—the parallel

fascinated him, while Borkmeyer's screaming words battered at his ears. That was what he had built—another Babel; not a city, not a commonwealth, but this futile counterfeit—a crowd, a mob.

Slowly, with the clamour of the agitator's abuse dulling behind him, he walked back to the mills. His mind moved against his will, carrying him remorselessly toward a decision he foresaw and against which all his instincts cried out. The guard at the gate challenged him sharply. He felt the tension in the tone. This man too stood in the path, a straw in the course of a torrent. He stopped as the fellow recognized him.

"Where's Leary?"

The guard wasn't sure. He thought the leader would be down by the train. Trafford turned away, conscious of a dominant force which refused to pause and parley with his marshalled logic. The lighted windows of the cars guided him. He found Leary talking in whispers with a group gathered on the platform of the rearmost sleeper.

"They're due to show up any time now." Leary spoke in a hush of excitement "I've had a couple of men down there and they say it's a sure thing."

"Get your men on board and pull out," said Trafford. "Hurry up! I want you off the grounds in half an hour."

Leary stared.

"I don't get you. You mean you're going to quit—now?"

"I mean what I say! Get your men and get out! Now!"

"But, Mr. Trafford"—Leary's voice lifted—"they mean business down there. Even if you're ready to quit, it's a safe bet they'll tear hell loose before you can tell 'em——"

"I'm giving orders here." Trafford moved his head as a man does when a persistent insect troubles him. "Get your men off my grounds in half an hour. That's all!"

He saw the contempt deepen in the lean face. Leary's lips drew clear of his short teeth. He swore in a thin, grating whisper and spat in the cinders of the roadbed.

"All right! Just as you say!"

He turned, spoke to the men behind him. Trafford stayed only to see them scatter on his bidding. Then, walking heavily, he went back to the office. When the mills went down Matthew Trafford would go down with them. There was a curious

consolation in the thought. It came to him with an effect of rest after strain. His work was done.

He watched the string of lights move down the track, vanish at the first curve. He sat before the window which overlooked the main gates, strangely at peace with himself. He took no heed of time. It might have been an hour before his ear caught the first sound of the mob—a faint, droning noise, rising and falling a little, like a chant. Lights appeared in the darkness of the street, wavering and dancing sparks, brightening and expanding as he watched them.

He drew in a slow breath. It wouldn't be long now. He knew what would happen in spite of Borkmeyer's fantastic proposals of confiscation. Once that mob streamed through the gates with its gasoline torches there would be only one result. "Fire makes all clean again"—the quotation crept into his thought with an effect of reassurance. He wondered whether the polyglot mob had burned their tower ages ago at Babel. Probably they had tried. Fire makes all clean—

He sprang up, himself again, as his door opened.
"Margaret!"

He ran toward her, his interval of madness past,

his mind keenly awake to the danger which threatened her through him.

"I had to come," she whispered. "I tried to stay away, but—"

"Never mind. We'll have to hurry or they'll find us here." He gripped her arm, drawing her toward the stairs. "You must run. They'll be here in a minute or two."

"But the guards—"

"I've sent them away. You're right. It isn't worth fighting for. Let them smash it. Fire makes all clean."

She ran beside him now, keeping pace with him. He felt a savage pride in this, as if her strength and swiftness were somehow his. They reached the side entrance as the torches swept in at the main gates. He led the way straight up the slope of the bare hill. A hundred yards from the street it flattened to another level. He stopped and turned. A long spout of yellow flame stabbed up into the night. He laughed.

"I thought so. It'll make a pretty fire, Margaret."

She touched his arm.

"I don't understand why—"

"But you do! It was your idea! I—I guess

I lost my head or I'd have fought it out. But somehow I seemed to see it all as you must have seen it yesterday. It's better for them to kill the golden goose—better for me too, maybe. I—it's queer how the thing rests me, Margaret. I'm through——”

“I know! I feel that too. There was a kind of weight, as if we carried them all on our shoulders.”

“Yes—when Nature meant them to walk. Any-way, it's ended. And Trafford's ended too. With the mills gone there won't be even the shell of a city here.”

“I wonder.”

The flare of the spreading flames lighted her face. Her voice stirred his curiosity.

“Don't. The town dies when the mills stop. That's sure!”

“I wonder. You won't go, will you? You're going to stay here?”

“Maybe. I hadn't thought about it. Yes, I suppose I'll stay.”

“Yes, and so will the others who belong here. We're rooted deep, Matt—deeper than we know.”

His name on her lips startled him. He was silent, studying her in the blaze of the Babel he and she had built.

"They'll go, of course, those poor, stupid cattle, but they'll leave us here. There was Trafford before there were mills. It won't die. They—our grandfathers built better than we have, Matt."

"Maybe." He was not interested. Something deeper than his compelling dreams of his city absorbed him now. He touched her arm. "Margaret, you helped me do it. You hated it, and yet you worked as hard as I did."

She lifted her shoulders.

"Yes, it was better than—than nothing. I suppose we've all a little of the building instinct in us. We ought to have. Think of the blood in us, the blood of men who chose to fight their way back into the hills and make a nation in a wilderness, and the women who went with them. We can't help trying to do what they did. We'll build badly, if we must, but we'll build something."

"I wonder if they meant it." He pressed his lips straightly. "Do you suppose they went about it deliberately, as I did—planned to found a republic in the woods?" He broke off in a laugh. "Of course they didn't! They never dreamed of anything like this. All they wanted was—was—"

"It doesn't matter. They built something—

and it endures. And what we built—you and I together——”

She flung a hand out toward the roaring fires at their feet. The light streamed on her face. Quite simply and suddenly Matthew Trafford saw the truth by that illumination.

“I know—now. They weren’t trying to build towns or cities or nations—those people began at the beginning. They built—families—homes. They built—men and women. Margaret——”

She turned slowly, calmly toward him. And the fire, making all clean where he had built his Babel, gave him light to understand her eyes. He knew that his building had not ended—nor begun. And he knew that it would endure.

THE OBLIGEE

I

HERBERT CORNISH arrested his index finger in the act of contact with the push button inset between the windows of his section. The reduplicated jarring with which the Limited announced its passage over the Belt Line crossing reminded him that he was within the city limits of Lakeport and that the processes of self-reformation upon which he was inexorably decided were now formally inaugurated. He had deferred the turning of his new leaf to this penultimate moment in exchange for a solemn compact with his disturbed conscience that, once turned, it should be turned irrevocably and without compromise. The double tracks of the Belt Line fixed a vital boundary in his life. By the commonplace affair of crossing that frontier he became a changed man.

He set his teeth resolutely on the thought, and his image, surveying him from the narrow mirror

above the still-tempting push button, registered a fitting expression of sacrificial determination.

"I've got to watch the trifles," he informed his reflection. "The big things will take care of themselves. It's the little ones that'll trip me if I don't keep both eyes spread for 'em."

He exchanged nods with the mirror and, uncrossing his rather long legs, lowered a pair of resplendent oxfords to the drugget. Their gleaming surface attracted his glance. He lost a brief approval of their polish in a stab of realization. Last night, while he slept tranquilly in the lower berth which represented the combined goodwill of a ticket seller and a Pullman conductor, the tired mulatto in the white jacket had laboured to impart that pluperfection of dull russet radiance to his shoe leather. He frowned a little as he made his way to the water cooler and drank. Even the virtuous consciousness that he had helped himself to this refreshment instead of sending the porter after it did not wholly balance the reproach.

"Watch the trifles," he admonished himself as he regained his place. "That's the whole trick."

He climbed on the seat to reach his hat and coat, bent and strapped his kit bag with an approving inner glow. These petty services, resolutely per-

formed by and for himself, were the very fibre of his regenerative programme. The Herbert Cornish of twenty-four hours ago would have left them to be done by the bustling negro. The new Herbert was on vigilant guard against their insidious appeal to habit become almost instinct.

"Yassuh!" The porter's voice interrupted his meditations. "Jes' lemme bresh y'off, suh, an'——"

Herbert Cornish checked himself in midstep toward the aisle. Another trifle. He shook his head, his face hardening into a scowl addressed to his forgetful impulses but instantly discernible in the chocolate countenance.

"Never mind that, Sam." He spoke brusquely. "Here." The half dollar he dropped on the incongruous pink palm made ready amends. Sam's grin reappeared.

"Thank y', suh. Jes' lemme take 'n' cyarry yo' bag——"

Again Herbert Cornish overcame impulse, but with a belated recollection which translated itself into something like harshness.

"No. Leave it right there. I'll carry it myself."

He was obliged to repeat the command, and his tone left the porter's face almost sullen as the white jacket moved to the next section. Cornish was

vaguely displeased at this. He liked the feel of other people's good nature. But he straightened his shoulders as he congratulated himself on his beginning. In a little while, he told himself, these processes would become wholly mechanical as he acquired the habit of self-reliance. It was only at first that they would involve a distinct effort of memory and will.

He swung down to the open platform, the shrewd thrust of the lake wind reminding him that Lakeport's winter climate had always been persistently an exception to the general amiability of the place. Tiny frozen rivulets made the concrete of the platform uncertain underfoot. He slipped several times before he reached the subterranean stairway. A redcap, slithering joyously toward him, called him by name, laying hands on the kit bag. Again it required a sharp assertion of will to refuse the proffered service, and again the effort expressed itself in a gruffness of tone. The porter stared, his welcoming grin fading.

Herbert Cornish carried the look with him into the tunnel with a lingering sense of reproach. He detested the sight of displeasure, and only his new resolutions prevented his making amends. The little things—the inconsiderable trifles—these had

riveted his bonds on him in the past. Only by breaking those minor restraints, one by one, could he hope to attain freedom in the end.

He emerged on Iroquois Street, aware of an unfamiliar aspect. Always till now the drab thoroughfare had smiled a welcome through its soot and mire. Today, under the grey sky, it scowled at him. He saw it for the first time with the judicial eye of the stranger.

"Ought to clean house down here," he said to himself. "Gives any traveller a rotten idea of the town to land in a slum like this."

A frown drew a vertical groove between his brows, vanishing as a closed car slid to an abrupt stop with a whine of brake drums and a scraping rasp of tires. The door snapped open and a gloved hand seized his own.

"Herb! What you doing in these parts?" Johnny Tarrant surveyed him amiably. "Where you going? Hop in."

Cornish answered the final question first. "Out home," he said, his own grin of pleasure erasing itself to a grim straightness of lip. "Just got in."

"Hop in," said Tarrant again. "Run you out there."

With his foot on the running board Herbert

Cornish remembered and drew back, shaking his head. "No, thanks. Go up on trolley. Much obliged."

Tarrant persisted. "No bother—enjoy the spin. Come on."

Cornish was tempted. The smooth swift ride on Johnny Tarrant's sybaritic upholstery would be very different from the half-hour journey in one of the battered relics which Lakeport continued to regard as trolley cars. And listening to Johnny would cheer him up, too—take his mind off things. But he stiffened his spine and stood firm. Insensibly his tone stiffened in sympathy.

"No, I'll go out in a trolley. Much obliged."

For the third time since his resolutions had become effective he watched an eager friendliness dissolve into rebuffed resentment.

"All right. Suit yourself."

Tarrant closed the door with a slightly superfluous emphasis. Herbert Cornish watched the car take the Lincoln Street corner with an angry skid of the rear wheels. It puzzled him to observe the effect of his reform. His decision had spared Johnny Tarrant the long drive to Oak Hill and back again—enabled him to be at his desk promptly at eight, after his punctual habit, and yet Johnny

was sore about it. Queer. He shook his head as he climbed to the step of a trolley and meditated to the rhythmic jar of a flat wheel, his glance regarding Main Street with an alien disapproval.

Maybe it was a mistake to come back to Lakeport. After all, it was a stupid little town, in the awkward age, undecided between cityship and villagedom. He would have found better opportunity somewhere else. As for his friends, since he was resolved to make no use of them, they represented liabilities rather than assets. Distract a fellow. Yes, it would have been better to pick out a strange town for the new leaf. Do it yet, for that matter. See his father and get things straightened out there, and then beat it to Chicago or New York. He considered this project deliberately during the uncomfortable ride. It had possibilities. Meanwhile——

His pace slowed as he neared the white pillars of the cheerful house on Oak Hill Drive, lifting above grey banks of sooty snow. Usually he covered these intervening squares almost at a run, but today it was different. He shrank from the interview with his father—distracting the prospect the more because he knew that it would be utterly

free of rancour. If he could have been sure that his father would lose his temper, explode in angry reproaches, he would have been less reluctant. It would be mighty hard to hold fast to the new principles in the face of the way they'd treat him at home.

The prophecy was justified when the door swung open and Katy, profound of bosom and deeply pink of cheek, made him welcome with her thick North Irish speech. He felt his good intentions melting under her proprietary greetings. In spite of himself he suffered her to deprive him of his hat, to help him out of the overcoat.

"Jist be lavin' yer vaylise right here an' coom oot to the dinin' room."

He fancied he caught a premonitory hint of bacon in the air. It was good to be home, after all. He grinned.

"Father down yet?"

"Anny minutt now. Lave him find ye to yer breakfast, annyhow. 'Twill do him no harm if ye ate a bite first."

He submitted. Breakfast at home—he was suddenly aware of an aching hunger. His father found him engaged with wheat cakes and tiny sausages. He got to his feet clumsily, flushing a

little under the twinkling level eyes. Charles Cornish chuckled.

"Well, I'm beginning to understand why they were glad to have the prodigal home again. He probably stood well with the cook. Is that actual maple syrup you've got there? I thought as much. They've been giving me something that tastes like corncobs ever since you went back."

They shook hands and the elder man drew in his chair with a visible display of eagerness. Herbert's conscience assaulted him. Most fathers would have glared and growled. A fine way to repay—he plunged into the topic very much as if approaching a cold tub.

"I've got to get it off my chest, father. I've been a pretty sad imitation so far. But this thing's opened my eyes. I'm through. From now on—"

"Reformed character, eh? Well, there's no vice in that." Charles Cornish grinned at his son. "Don't take it so seriously, Herbert. Getting dropped from your class isn't half as catastrophic as it looks to you just now. You'll find the net result rather pleasant. Instead of four years you'll have five—and later on you'll wish they'd been a dozen."

Herbert set his teeth. "I knew you'd take that view of it, sir. It's—it's mighty white of you. But I'm not going back. I'm all through. From now on I'm standing on my own legs. Right after breakfast I'm going downtown and hunt up a loose job and put my mark on its hide. I'm going to live on what I make it pay me. I'm going to _____."

"That's all highly commendable. But don't let it interfere with your breakfast. Katy must have made these cakes herself. I know that touch. It's almost worth having you flunked out to tease her back into the kitchen for a day or two."

His father's persistent flippancy began to annoy Herbert. It was all very well to be philosophic about his miserable record at college, but it wasn't exactly a joke, after all. He lapsed into a scowling silence, broken presently by Charles Cornish's good-natured introduction of finances.

"You'll be needing some money——"

"No. I'll earn my money after this." Herbert was distinctly ungracious in the disclaimer. "I'm not going to take another cent."

"Don't carry this eight-o'clock reformation too far, son. An excellent rule about money, you'll

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discover presently, is to take it when it's in reach.
Here——”

He proffered two or three bills. Herbert shook his head.

“No, sir. I meant what I said. I'm all through being an obligee.”

Charles Cornish frowned interrogatively. Then his face cleared and mellowed in his frequent smile.

“I see. The word puzzled me at first. You're resolved to be the obliger henceforward, eh? Well, there's something in that. It's really better fun to do something for the other fellow than to have him do it for you.”

“It's not a matter of fun, sir.” Herbert was stiffer than ever. “It's—it's a principle. I've made a rotten hash of things just because I've been the obligee all my life. I've done nothing but accept favours ever since I can remember. Katy wouldn't let me dress myself till I was nine, and I'll bet she frames up some excuse to fix my tie tonight. You—you always did my lessons for me. I found out the first time I asked you that you'd do all my examples if I said I couldn't get the first one right. And it's been like that with everybody and everything. I've just lived on other people's friendliness. That's why I'm out of

college. I drifted through the first two years on what I picked up; there was always some fellow willing to give me a lift with anything that looked like real work. I'd float along till the week before examination and then let some plugger cram me with stuff out of his notebooks and squeeze through on it. Oh, I see it plainly enough now. Why, when Professor Ransome examined me, day before yesterday—to see whether the committee would give me another chance, you know—I didn't know a blessed thing about anything except French and Spanish. They must have come mighty easy or I wouldn't have picked up even the little I seem to have learned about them. Professor Ransome said I was far and away the most densely ignorant person he'd ever met. Why, I didn't even know——”

“Never mind the horrible details, please.” Charles Cornish lifted a hand. “I think I follow your general drift. Go on with your elucidation of principle. People have always done things for you, with the result that you haven’t learned to do much for yourself, eh?”

“Yes. Professor Ransome spotted it. He was awfully white about it all. Said I was young enough to get over it if I made up my mind to it.

And he was right. I can see just what it's done to me. I'm no good on earth as I stand. But from now on——”

He left the sentence in the air. His father regarded him steadily, a faintly provocative glimmer in his clear eye, his long fingers drumming slowly on the cloth.

“I see. Perhaps your tutorial friend has the right of it. We've certainly made life rather simple for you so far. I think you overestimate the deadly effect of it all, but it can't hurt you to try the other thing for a while. Suppose you come down to the office with me today. You can put in the time to advantage there. And in the fall you can enter the law school if you're set on not going back to finish at college.”

“No, sir. That's only compromising. In your office I'd still be nothing but an obligee—I wouldn't be there on my merits, I mean. I'm going to go it alone—absolutely. Find my own job——”

“Very well.” Charles Cornish spoke in a perceptibly different tone. The twinkle had left his eyes. He folded the bills and returned them to his pocket. “If you're ready we'll ride down together.”

“No, thanks. I can't afford motor cars just

yet. And till I can afford my own I'll go without 'em. The trolley'll get me down."

"Just as you like, of course." The elder man rose. "If you should change your mind about coming into the office——"

"I won't." Herbert bit off the word with decision. "I'm going it on my own—absolutely."

In the hall he discovered that his kit bag had vanished. He found it in his room, with Katy in the act of removing the nethermost layer of its contents. She regarded him with the worshipful eye of ownership and expressed a highly derogatory opinion of his packing, of the college laundry, and the acumen of the faculty in one intricately compound sentence.

"But ye'll be ahl right noo," she concluded. "I'll be takkin' care of ye proper."

"Katy, I want it understood that you've got to let my things alone," he said deliberately. Better have it out with her once for all. Have to treat her rough, too, or she'd think he was joshing. "I'll attend to my own affairs after this. I don't want you meddling about my room again."

He closed the door on her astounded countenance. The look in her sky-coloured eyes hurt him. It was brutal, perhaps, but, as Professor Ransome had

said, trivial concessions would negative major reform unless he watched and guarded eternally against them.

"Why, Katy's more of a man than I am right now," he informed himself. "'S got to stop. Oblige—why, I'm a lap dog!"

II

HIS half decision to emigrate before beginning the sterner phases of self-reconstruction abated as he changed his clothes, choosing a neutrally inconspicuous suit and a monochrome scarf which provided him with an aspect he found harmonious toward his present purpose. He felt that looked very much like the wash drawings in the advertisements of epistolary universities and of magical books warranted to wreak miracles of character development for an immediate dollar and a monthly procession of duplicates. There was a new quality of jut about his jaw above the dull blue of the tie; his eyes evinced a fixity of intent at once foreign and reassuring. Confronted by this purposeful reflection, the idea of deferring his plunge into self-reliance until he could relocate the setting became repulsive. He needed the outlet of present action to relieve and employ the pressure of his superheated resolves.

"I'll do it here," he informed himself. "I'll

show 'em that I can walk on my own shoes—right in the town where I've been a darned obligee all my life!"

He repulsed, with rather more heat than usual, a stubborn endeavour on the part of Katy to provide him with rubber overshoes, and emerged after the victory with his chin slightly more aggressive than ever. He walked briskly to the corner where a compressed group of stores trespassed on the residential preserves of Oak Hill and procured copies of all three morning papers. On board a town-bound trolley he examined them. Their classified advertising columns spread a promising bulk of agate to his questing eye. Plenty of jobs open, evidently. He set himself to a methodical examination, alphabetically arranged. Accountant, advertising writer, bushelman—he wondered why a tailoring establishment should demand assistance in something obviously agricultural—and so through a bewildering list terminating in the inclusive category of Young Men—the only classification in which he felt justified in considering himself.

Young men were in some demand for a variety of engagements, he observed. They were desired to learn the insurance business; to collaborate with

a funeral director alleged to cater exclusively to high-class trade; to subscribe for courses in the art of scenario writing; to sell coffee, tea, and spices from a motor car provided by the advertiser; to apply for a number of undescribed situations.

He frowned thoughtfully as he contemplated these opportunities. None of them appealed strongly to his vague yearning. He returned to the specific demands. Possibly inexperience might prove no bar in some one of them; clearly a bushelman, for instance, could not have been born with a command of that mystifying profession. He paused at the arresting word "export," suddenly captivated by its hint of romance, by a mental picture of clipper ships in the roaring forties, of spice-smelling old offices overlooking wharves and harbours, of merchandise instinct with adventure:

"Export man to assist manager in well-established Foreign Department. Experience desirable. Knowledge of Spanish indispensable. Excellent future for right man."

He creased the paper about the item and detached it neatly. A craven thought which pleaded his unsophistication as a barrier was sternly put down. He arranged his features in a pose of unrelenting

purpose, mindful of the forceful young men in the advertisements. "That's my job," he announced to an inner audience. He frowned again as he realized the necessity of delay. He must apply by letter, addressed to a mere number in care of the *Messenger*. And he was among the worst living letter writers—thanks again to his miserable career as a chronic obligee. Phil Brewer had amiably attended to his correspondence during their two-year partnership in rooms at college, and before that there had been no need of letters. He glowered at this fresh evidence of the malign effect of his besetting habit. Professor Ransome's kindly enlightenment resounded in his ear.

"Every faculty atrophies fast under disuse, Cornish. You've stunted yourself in every phase of development by your insidious ability to make other people wait on you. They've profited—not you. You've paid for their schooling."

He could see the gleam of enthusiasm in the near-sighted eyes, the rhythmic wag of the forefinger punctuating the lecture.

"You're young. It's not hard to rebuild your character if you set about it now—while you're still plastic. But it's not easy either. It isn't enough to avoid asking favours; you've got to learn to

watch for them and refuse them as if they were poisonous drugs. And even that won't do—you've got to build up initiative and power in yourself by exercise, by finding obstacles and climbing over them, even when there are none in your way, even when there's a smooth path round them."

He nodded in agreement with this doctrine. You couldn't develop even an elementary thing like a decent biceps without giving your arm exercise—chest weights and dumb-bells if there wasn't anything more diverting and profitable to occupy them. Certainly an elusive quality like will power couldn't be acquired without some similar process.

Well, here was an obstacle all right. A letter to Number B-471 challenged his wits on the very threshold of reform. How in thunder——? He brightened. Don McMillan would be delighted to compose an application for him—write it right off on his typewriter without stopping to think of a single word. Of course! He congratulated himself on the device. Easy enough to climb over that obstacle!

"Even when there's a smooth path round them."

The words boomed through his brain with an effect of implacable accusation. He straightened

under their thunder as if he had actually heard them. There! The old habit slipping one over on him the instant he lowered his guard! He wagged his head.

"Gee—I'm worse than I thought! I pretty near fell for that one!"

He concentrated his wits on the difficulty, contemptuous now of the easy channel round it. There must be some way over it, some succession of handholds by which one of the prominent-chinned young men in the advertisements would clamber triumphantly up the sheer wall. H'm. Somebody must know who Number B-471 was. In the newspaper office, of course—he grinned at the simplicity of it. That showed a fellow! You could always manage if you didn't quit at the first sign of difficulty in the way.

He dropped from the platform in mid-square, skipped blithely out of the path of a scudding flivver to the accompaniment of a roaring apostrophe from its driver and covered the distance to the newspaper office almost at a run.

Here he was briefly puzzled by a minor problem. The *Messenger* flaunted a lobby as ponderously gaudy and complex as a bank's—an affair of onyx and bronze and redwood with a bewildering num-

ber of wicket windows in the grille. He made a canny circuit before deciding on his target. Under a sign of "Replies to Advertisements" he confronted a familiar face. He could not remember the name, but his memory flashed a picture of these freckles and that carrot-coloured hair, appurtenances to a knickerbockered boy who screamed encouragement from the side lines to a half back on the high-school eleven.

"Hello there."

He thrust a hand over the plate-glass shelf. The freckles seemed to overlap in the grin which responded. They exchanged the commonplaces. Herbert leaned closer.

"Say, you can do me a big favour. Mighty lucky you're on this job." He produced the clipped advertisement. "I'm trying to find who's back of this."

The freckles separated to their normal spacing. An upright line scored a path between two pinkish brows. Cornish recognized the symptoms accurately. Experience had perfected his technique to the point of finesse. He waited. "If it's too much trouble——" He inserted the phrase at precisely the right stage of the conflict visible behind the freckles. Decision dawned instantly in the eyes.

"No. It's against the rules, but seeing it's you —" The voice lowered. There was a moment of fumbling with index cards on a counter visible through the glass shelf. "Empire Specialty—46 Blake. Don't let on you found out here, will you?"

"Trust me." Cornish wagged his head. "I tell you, old man, you're a regular lifesaver. I won't forget this. Much obli——"

The word broke in the utterance. His jaw dropped. There it was again! The moment he relaxed his vigilance habit landed another blow! He hadn't surmounted his obstacle after all. He'd just grafted a ride round it on the goodwill of this kid whose name he'd forgotten—if he'd ever heard it! Nothing but an obligee!

He meditated swiftly. He couldn't undo it now. The knowledge was irrevocably his. To refrain from applying it would be merely silly. He shook hands again and went out, his mind a theatre for belligerent emotions. To be sure he'd profited by friendliness, but at least he had used a little invention and industry in clearing the way for that benevolence. The net result indicated progress, he told himself. And, besides, the big difficulty lay before him still. He knew who wanted a young

man with a command of Spanish to assist the export manager, but this knowledge was considerably short of establishing that he was the particular young man to supply that demand. He thrust the episode back in his thought. Blake Street? He resisted an impulse to seek enlightenment of a traffic policeman and ferreted diligently in the back of a directory.

His self-reliance brought him to the wrong end of Blake Street half an hour later, and he walked a mile more to reach the plant of the Empire Specialty Company—a severely ordered rectangle of brick buildings enclosing a plot of barbered turf and a mathematical flower bed in the exact centre of this. The outward aspect of the establishment exacted his approval. There was no reason why a factory shouldn't be as self-respecting as a residence. Evidently the Empire Specialty Company made money enough to spare a little of it on mere appearances and—more important—wasn't afraid of spending it. Liberal people—broad-minded. A slight weakening of his resolution was stayed by the omen. He braced his shoulders and marched into the office curiously forewarned of success.

A directory in the corridor informed him that Edgar Lanigan was president. Instinct bade him

aim high. There was enough brass in his manner as he thrust one of his personal cards through a wicket labelled "Inquiries" to impress the aloof lady beyond it. He smilingly declined her invitation to join a group of waiting suppliants who occupied straight-backed chairs along the wall of the anteroom, and thrust his hands into his pockets, strolling casually about the open space to inspect an array of framed advertisements which enlightened him as to the specialties emanating from the Empire factories.

It appeared that the Empire dedicated itself to polishes. It purveyed an impressive variety of substances, liquid and paste and powder, each eagerly warranted to revive and impart lustre. There were polishes for shoe leather and silver, polishes for pianos and plate glass, for mahogany and metal signs, for motor cars and marble, for brass and copper and stoves and kettles and jewellery. Grouped thus, the aggregate effect was distinctly imposing. It caught cunningly at Herbert Cornish's fancy to behold a conjointure of unconsidered trifles out of which all this tangible prosperity had been evolved—the rows of buildings about the shaven turf and the geometrical flower plat, the blended hum of industry which filled his

ears, the unmistakable symbols of wealth in the very structure and decoration of the office in which he waited.

Again he recalled Professor Ransome's admonitions. Trifles had all but wrecked him; well, trifles should restore him! He shut his lips on a sudden resolve to dominate the august Edgar Lanigan in the interview before him. It did not occur to him to doubt his ability to win entry to the presidential presence.

His ideas of business etiquette had not as yet distinguished themselves from the usages of social intercourse.

When a man called on you you received him as a matter of course. It startled him to overhear the girl at the wicket inform one of the waiting gentlemen that Mr. McDonough couldn't see him. He imagined a motive for an insult so direct—some deadly offence which Mr. McDonough found himself unable to forgive. And yet the caller departed without visible dejection. It puzzled him.

"Mr. Lanigan will see you now, Mr. Cornish."

He nodded gravely and followed a saturnine office boy along a cork-carpeted corridor to a ground-glass door. Beyond this, in a high wide room of mahogany and plate glass, he confronted

a familiar face. He remembered Mr. Lanigan now as an acquaintance of his father's to whom he himself had been casually presented on the occasion of some street encounter. Lanigan, a solid gentleman, remarkably massive and pink of jowl and exhibiting an expanse of naked scalp upon which, Herbert thought, he must have tested all the polishing compounds in his factory, shook hands energetically and indicated a humidor on his table.

"Well, Herbert—what brings you out here? I thought you were down putting the finishing touches on—"

"I've left college. I'm looking for a job. I thought you could use me in your export department." Cornish congratulated himself on the crisp staccato sentences. They sounded business-like. "I know some Spanish and French and a bit of Italian—"

Lanigan regarded him more soberly, his eyes narrowing, his cigar sending up a hurrying, tremulous thread of blue before them.

"H'm. That's quite a coincidence. We're running an ad. in today's papers that just about describes you." The eyes contracted more noticeably. "Anybody leak in our office?"

Cornish hesitated. Even an indirect lie gagged him under the conditions. One suppressed unpleasant truths, in his code, as a matter of courtesy and course; one didn't tamper with the fact for motives of personal profit.

"No, sir. But I did know you wanted somebody. I'd rather not say how I found out, though. It wasn't through any leak in your office."

Lanigan meditated on this. He nodded slowly, as one who finds enlightenment. "All right. I know how you managed it then." He nodded again. "You've got some ingenuity in you—and some speed too. We'll see what else you've got."

He manipulated a desk telephone and summoned somebody named Blitz, who promptly presented a ramrod erectness terminating in blunt-toed shoes diverging at a ninety-degree angle and, at the opposite extremity, a lantern-jawed countenance curiously expressive of leashed energy. Herbert Cornish was made acquainted with the export manager, who regarded him with a stabbing eye which seemed to photograph and measure him in a glance.

"He deserves a chance at that job in your department, Blitz. He's got down here while the

others are hunting for paper and stamps. Knows some languages, he tells me, but he listens like a hustler, which is better than all the words in the dictionaries. Try him out anyway."

Blitz clicked his heels and bowed sharply from the upper end of his neck.

"Very good, sir. This way, please, Cornish."

He about faced and marched briskly into the corridor. Herbert waited a moment. "I'm ever so much obli—" He caught the word on the wing and swallowed it. "I'll do my darnedest," he amended.

Lanigan regarded him benevolently.

"Angels can do no more," he chuckled. "Remember me to your father. And tell him, for me, he's not in your class for speed."

Somehow, as he overtook the vanishing Blitz, Herbert Cornish was aware of a cloud on his satisfaction. He identified it presently as caused by the reference to his father. It would have been more convincing if this chance had been wrested from a total stranger. As it was, he felt suspiciously like the obligee in the transaction.

He plunged into the intricacies of export selling, as elucidated by Karl Blitz, with a sullen intensity of concentration, pointed by this troublesome re-

flection. Wasn't he ever going to find his own feet and stand on them? Was he always to be, *nolens volens*, the obligee? He answered the question emphatically. He was not!

III

FOR ten days he held inexorably to a programme of intensive self-education. His work was purely an affair of instruction at the side of the seemingly omniscient Blitz. For eight hours a day he confronted ranked armies of strange unfriendly facts, each one of which must be absorbed, remembered, correlated with its fellows. His ignorance afflicted him with a constant sense of suffocation under an enveloping blanket which hampered his arms and blinded his sight besides interfering with his breath. It seemed to him, in those early days, that no single mind could possibly grasp and hold the innumerable items of essential knowledge which Blitz exhibited and commented upon.

His evenings, his Saturday half-holidays, his Sundays went intact into a study of Spanish utterly unlike the agreeable process by which he had absorbed a superficial acquaintance with the tongue at college. He was appalled to discover, by contact with correspondents and study of their

work, how little he knew of the one thing in which his academic record indicated enlightenment.

His new method discarded everything not mercilessly practical. He read real letters from real people about such super-realities as consular invoices, duties, discounts, and commissions. He set himself to answer these and presently hired one of the clerks in the outer office to supervise his endeavours in this direction, after discovering the profundity of his own inadequacy to deal with a language which persists in the absurdity of interpreting "My dear sir" as "Very mister mine."

Ovidio Vásquez P. suffered from a constitutional inability to pronounce English words which he read and wrote with an uncanny agility. He conveyed an impression of incompetency which had chained him fast to an underpaid job in the correspondence room. Herbert Cornish selected him as his tutor chiefly because of the necessity of conversing with him in his own speech, but he speedily acquired a tolerant affection for the earnest, shy little man, and a well-founded respect for his intelligence. He intentionally overpaid him for the lessons, guessing that Ovidio's economic problems were highly complex affairs. As his interest

deepened he meddled in the little Costa Rican's personal concerns, extricating him from a pestilient abode in a railroad boarding-house and finding him decent quarters at no greater cost, informing him patiently on such mystifying matters as trolley transfers and laundry lists. Mentally he resolved to use his influence—as soon as he got it—to provide a better job for his protégé. He was surprised to discover how much he liked Ovidio Vásquez P. after a week or two of this.

He was troubled during these early days by a distressing desire on the part of his friends to celebrate his home-coming. He had never paused to count them up, and after his illuminating interview with Professor Ransome he had thought of them rather shamefacedly as the victims of his casual adventures as an obligee. Probably the people he had considered as his friends had always seen this defect in him, had endured it more or less unwillingly. But it seemed that his popularity was, after all, a genuine affair. He had to be almost surly to protect his spare time against insidious proposals. People wanted him to dine with them, to join jolly parties at the theatre, to waste long nocturnal hours on frivolous little dances, to play bridge and poker and billiards. It was very

hard to make them understand that he was through with all that sort of thing.

He had to be perpetually on guard against his father too. Charles Cornish simply couldn't understand the deadly effect of his well-meant advances. He was constantly offering pocket-money; he urged Herbert to choose a car at his expense; he skilfully led up to suggestions of evening diversions together. And there was a visible wistfulness in his eyes at his son's wary refusals and evasions.

"I tell you, father, I can't let down the bars an inch. I've got to get the best of this habit or it'll get the best of me for keeps. Please don't look as if I'd deliberately hurt your feelings. It's like breaking off cigarettes. Every one a fellow smokes weakens his resistance just that much."

After these explanations Charles Cornish always brightened to a tolerant grin, but his son was irritatedly aware that the sting of his refusals lingered under that amusement. It just couldn't be helped.

As for Katy, there was no possible way of handling her except crass brutality. She had ministered to him for eighteen of his twenty-one years and nothing could shake the security of her con-

viction that he was still dependently helpless. The worst of this phase of his undertaking was that she had the facts on her side. He had never learned to locate his belongings. It was too simple to thrust a bath-wet head out of his door and howl for Katy's expert information. Again and again he took himself in the very act of some such reversion. He adopted, for safety, an attitude of aggressive hostility toward her, with some success.

Katy was human. Rebuffs, administered with sufficient frequency and rancour, perceptibly chilled her ardour, though they did not prevent a tight-lipped persistency in what she regarded as her duty.

Eventually he chafed under his self-tyranny. The gregarious instinct was too deeply embedded in him to yield gracefully to the commands of his will. The society of Ovidio Vásquez P. failed to offset the sudden cessation of all other contacts outside of business hours. On the eleventh evening he found himself considering a catalogue of girls with a mental eye, while his physical vision wandered from the Spanish letter before him. It couldn't do much harm to indulge in a bit of pure amusement after a start like this. He dismissed Ovidio before nine, borrowing his father's car to

take the abbreviated Latin home. As he drove back up the hill the hunger for something non-utilitarian quickened in him. He went over the list cannily. There were several girls who were positively insidious about doing things for a fellow. He stopped the car, on impulse, at the Carroll place. No danger of weakening his resolutions in the company of Peggy Carroll! He chuckled at the absurd thought. Also, without intention, he ran up the flagged walk instead of walking.

Luck played on his side. Peggy was not only at home—a circumstance conspicuously unusual—but she was entertaining no one except herself. She waved a welcoming hand as he came into the wide, low room and her deliberate smile subtly intensified the amiability of the open fire and the shaded lamp.

"I was hoping somebody'd drop in," she informed him without prefatory commonplace of greeting. "I've been wanting that squashy cushion ever since I settled down here and I was beginning to be afraid I'd have to get it for myself. Thanks."

She wriggled her shoulders comfortably into the down pillow he inserted behind them and sighed luxuriously. He contemplated her with a new

approval. She wasn't in the least the kitten girl and yet she let a fellow do something for himself instead of picking out his chair for him and running about with cigarettes. A memory of Edith Ransome's fluttering attentions pointed the contrast. He echoed Peggy's sigh as he dropped into a fire-side chair and felt for his cigarette case. Queer he hadn't ever cared very much about Peggy. She indicated a magazine, open face downward, on the fender cushion.

"I'm right in the middle of a frightfully exciting story, Herbie. Would you mind looking at the end of it and telling me how it comes out? I can't get them off my mind till I know they're all right."

He grinned as he glanced at the illustration. "Suppose I read it to you if it's as important as all that?"

Her smile fanned an agreeable glow in him. He waded through the climactic paragraphs of a lurid narrative, enjoying the sound of his voice. Peggy thanked him nicely.

Somehow—absurd as it was—she reminded him of Ovidio Vásquez P. It would have been hard to imagine two less similar human beings, and yet he was distinctly conscious of some association. By a brief contemplation of this puzzling phenomenon

he was led to tell her about Ovidio, to quote some of the little man's funniest distortions of the Anglo-Saxon speech and, naturally, into talk of his work. Peggy knew how to listen.

"It sounds perfectly splendid," she told him. "I can see how it would interest you—keeping in touch with people thousands of miles away. It's something like exploring."

He was delighted at this understanding. Already the romance of overseas trade had begun to lay hold of him as the fog of his ignorance lifted a little. He was moved to technicalities. Peggy caught at a word.

"Panama? Why, that's queer. I've been wondering how to—" She sat up abruptly. "I want a wide-brimmed hat," she confided; "a simply monstrous one." She held up her hands to demonstrate. "And the stores don't sell them. They say they'd have to have somebody weave me one down there."

"Oh, I see." He exhibited a newly gained item of information. "They don't come from Panama at all. They're made in Ecuador—the best ones."

"It doesn't matter. Do you think you could persuade somebody to make me one? I'd be ever so grateful!"

"I should think it could be managed." He distinctly remembered an index card with an address in Ecuador. "Just give me the measurements and I'll try anyway."

She could be active enough, he observed, when something interested her. He carried away a paper pattern showing exactly the size and shape of hat she desired. And he carried, also, a distinctly new impression of Peggy herself. A nice girl. Somehow the adjective, when applied to her, acquired a definitude and precision hitherto wanting in it.

Analyzing his improved opinion of her, he presently discovered that she made him feel strong and competent and clever, without any recourse to flattery. Just the way she looked and acted and talked made a fellow conscious of unsuspected qualities in himself. That must be because she saw and respected them. She didn't think of Herbert Cornish as a flabby-spined obligee—she saw deeper than that, evidently. The way she had taken it for granted that he could procure that hat, when the stores had failed—that showed how she regarded him. He thought of her with a certain respect now. She was a percipient and astute observer, not deceived by his past short-

comings into mistaking him for a mere drifter with the current.

He collaborated during the noon hour next day in the composition of a personal letter to the firm named on the index card, supplying the substance of a request which Ovidio Vásquez P. delightedly ornamented with intricate Castilian arabesques of words. He was so taken with the resounding periods of the completed effort that he neglected to confiscate the carbon manifold from Ovidio's file basket. At the suggestion of his assistant he bought a draft for twenty-five dollars, drawn on a Guayaquil bank and payable to Gutiérrez Hermanos y Compañía.

"Moa-nay es-speak-es thee es-Spanish," explained Ovidio, "thee samm as thee Ang-glish."

Herbert Cornish chuckled, agreeing. Ovidio Vásquez P. was beginning to show symptoms of a reciprocal profit from their lessons. He mailed his letter and promptly forgot the episode in an absorbing affair of Chilean customs duties, utterly unaware of the tremendous consequences of his deed.

It did not even occur to him that he had done his best in the composition of that letter to revert to status of an obligee.

IV

ACROSS the big table in Lanigan's office Herbert Cornish met the small, implacable eyes of Karl Blitz, fixed relentlessly upon him and revealing a predatory glitter in which, uneasily, he detected a hint of triumph. Between them, a little sheaf of correspondence on his blotter, Edgar Lanigan wore an expression of judicial severity. He cleared his throat and addressed Cornish.

"I've been going over some letters which Blitz felt it his duty to bring to me, Cornish. I—what do you mean by it? Who authorized you to—to—"

Cornish saw the glitter brighten in Blitz's eyes. This did not surprise him. After the first few weeks of his business career there had been a steadily deepening dislike between the export manager and his deputy. Blitz had been friendly enough at first; he had even seemed to take an arid pleasure in imparting knowledge to an apprentice who learned so thirstily. Then, as Cornish found his feet, gained a certain self-adequacy in his work,

they had begun to detest each other without expressing it in words or actions. Cornish accepted this changed relation with something like relief. It spared him the need of being everlastingly on guard against Blitz's favours, of inventing excuses and evasions so that he might do his own work with his own wits instead of leaning weakly on Blitz's superior abilities. That the manager did not like him was natural enough. No doubt he regarded this youngster as a potential supplanter, a possible rival for his job. For his own part he found Blitz too much of a martinet in office discipline, too impatient of suggestion. But his sense of fair play was affronted by this covert attack through Lanigan. He stiffened.

"I don't know what Mr. Blitz accuses me of doing, Mr. Lanigan. If I've done anything out of the way——"

"Out of the way!" Lanigan barked. "You wrote these letters, didn't you?"

He thrust the pile of papers along the table. Cornish saw that they were original letters to which carbon copies of the replies had been clipped. He glanced at the uppermost one. Understanding came to him. Gutiérrez, Guayaquil! He felt himself flushing.

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"Yes, sir. I wrote them. I don't see why they——"

Lanigan controlled a mounting choler with an effort which visibly deepened the tint of his polished scalp.

"You don't, eh?" He spoke with elaborate calm. "You don't see anything unusual in bothering our customers with your petty private errands, do you? It strikes you as all right to pester the biggest house in Ecuador—the firm we've been trying to land as our agents for the last two years—over a fool hat for some girl! There's nothing wrong with your nerve anyway."

"They—they don't seem to have taken offence," said Herbert Cornish feebly. "If you read the whole correspondence——"

Lanigan abolished the plea with a sweeping arm. "Rats! Everybody knows that a Spaniard's the politest animal on earth. Step on his foot and he claims to be intoxicated with joy about it. You can discount the flowers in that letter by a hundred and ten per cent. and you know it. But that's not the point—not all of it. How did you go about squaring your obligation?"

Obligation! The sound of it boomed direfully in Herbert Cornish's brain. For the first time he

confronted the reality. He had been accepting favours—even begging for them—in the affronted face of all his noble resolutions! He forgot Lanigan and Blitz in the wave of self-contempt which flooded him. Nothing but an obligee!

"You beg this friend of yours to accept a little token of your appreciation and esteem," pursued Lanigan, quoting from the translation pinned to the fatal carbon. "And it seems that the Empire Specialty Company paid the freight on that same little token for you—yes, and the duty too! Which gets us away from the matter of mere damfoolishness and brings us down to something right on the edge of graft!"

Cornish got to his feet.

"I didn't foresee that construction. What I thought when I got that friendly letter from Guittérrez was that here was a chance to get some samples into his personal possession. I just had the shipping room fix up a case for him—one container of every polish we make—with the new Spanish labels. And I had the forwarders pay all charges because we've had some complaints about the samples we've shipped out by mail to firms who hadn't ordered 'em. It didn't occur to me that I could be accused of grafting on the firm. I'll be

very glad to repay whatever the charges run to—”

Lanigan waved a contemptuous hand.

“That’s neither here nor there. I guess we can stand a dollar or two without yelling for help. I didn’t understand from your letter that it was samples you were sending him. That disposes of the graft business. But it leaves the bull-headed stupidity just where it was. And you’ve done it to other firms too.”

Cornish ran through the remaining letters. His ears tingled as he realized that he had broken his rule half a dozen times. There was that affair of the Guatemalan stamps for instance. Jimmy Carroll had yearned for a set of the new issue, uncancelled, and it had seemed so simple to ask Ceballos & Hijos to buy them.

An innocent request for information about Argentine labour conditions to gratify old Mr. McKenna’s curiosity—why hadn’t he realized that he was putting himself under the yoke of obligation to Sres. Juan y José Hernández in asking their opinion?

“I’m sorry you don’t approve, sir,” he said slowly, recalling his thought to the present crisis at some expense in will power. “It seemed a perfectly natural thing to do.”

"Exactly!" Lanigan pounced on the adjective with a perceptible abatement in his rancour. "Herbie, you've put your finger right on the trouble. It *was* natural—for you. I had a talk with your father about you the day after you joined us and he told me about your failure at college. I watched you pretty close after that. There isn't any room in this shop for a fellow who rides the saw and lets the other lad do it for him. If I'd seen any sign of it—but I'm bound to say I didn't. You were all the other way. Wouldn't even let me give you a lift home in the car. I thought you were cured."

His normal good nature came back to him. He nodded to Blitz.

"That's all, Blitz. I appreciate the spirit in which you brought me this matter. And I'm sure Cornish doesn't bear malice—eh, Herbie?"

Herbert shook his head. It didn't matter what Blitz thought, or Lanigan either. The thing which monopolized his attention was the evidence of his relapse into his ancient habit. Nothing but an obligee—as long as he trusted to instinct. He scarcely heard Lanigan's half-paternal admonitions. He went back to his desk in a profound depression.

The mood clung to him through the rest of the

day; survived his ride home in a crowded trolley, a morose, silent dinner with his father. He would have liked to tell Charles Cornish about it all, but a restraint had formalized their relations lately. He met Katy in the hall after dinner and was aware of an impulse to stop and joke with her as he had loved to do before the days of his reform. But Katy brushed past him, her arms laden with new-ironed linen. It occurred to him that Katy had transferred her maternal ministrations to his father; she had let him alone for months now.

He was a little sorry for himself. He had paid a pretty steep price for his independence. It had cost him the old cheerful intimacy with his father, Katy's possessive devotion, the congenial friendships which had somehow dissolved since he had undertaken his reform. It was only a little more than a year since the turning of the new leaf and yet the time had sufficed to kill the kindness in which he had existed after the effortless fashion of a fish in water. Nobody summoned him by telephone to merry little dinners; if he went to a theatre he went alone, or took Ovidio Vásquez P., ostensibly as a matter of improving his English. Hostesses seemed to have dropped him out of their benevolent calculations. Even the men who had

wanted him for cards or golf or billiards had learned to let him alone.

All this would have mattered less, he thought, if it had bought him the stiffened soul fibre he needed. He had never counted the price as long as he lay under the illusion of reconstruction. But he had failed. By impulse he was still the persuasive, plausible seeker after favour—what had Lanigan called it?—a fellow who rode the saw. The instant he relaxed his vigilance he reverted to type. It was discouraging.

He answered the telephone with an unfamiliar throb of pleasure. Somebody remembered him—somebody wanted to talk to him! He was conscious of a flutter in his respiration as he spoke into the transmitter. The voice identified itself instantly as Peggy Carroll's.

"Oh, Herbie—I hate to bother you, but I'm due at a rehearsal 'way over at Harmonia Hall and Jimmy's eloped with the car. I thought——"

"I'll be right over."

He hung up the receiver with something like alacrity. His father had taken the coupé, but he found an added pleasure in chartering a livery car. Peggy scolded him delightfully for this extravagance as they bumped over neglected cobbles in

the unlovely quarter where she taught a settlement class and instigated very amateur dramatics.

Later, while he waited for her, he analyzed his attitude toward her. He liked her, he concluded, because she unknowingly fostered his reformative processes. She never trapped him into accepting favours when his guard was down; she went to the other extreme, indeed. He was always doing something for her. And, besides, she was agreeably appreciative. She really thanked a fellow instead of just repeating empty, mouth-worn phrases of gratitude. A kind of warmth in her tone made all the difference. A mighty nice girl, Peggy.

He waited a few minutes to listen to her thanks when they reached the Carroll house. It occurred to him, rather irrelevantly, that Peggy was pretty—no, not exactly pretty either. Good-looking came nearer to it—attractive put it even more accurately. He found himself stumbling and flushing through a good-night.

He dismissed the hired car and walked home. Spring, rebuffed for weeks by the drifting ice in the lake, had had her way at last. There was a thin moon and the shadows stippled a revived turf with inky traceries of branches just swelling into leaf-

age. The air was amiable, gentled to the cheek like the touch of caressing fingers. A pleasant melancholy possessed him, a sense of vague desires susceptible of attainment once he recognized them, named them.

Queer, he thought, that out of all the Lakeport people who had liked him only Peggy Carroll and Ovidio Vásquez P. had any interest in him now. Even Katy—even his father—he remembered, suddenly, that he had been conscious of some association between Ovidio and Peggy long ago.

Could it have been foreknowledge that their friendship would survive the change in him? Or was it merely that each owed him thanks for kindnesses received? He had done a good deal for Ovidio, come to count it up. Thanks to his instructions and example the little man had learned an astonishing amount about oral English, had acquired an aplomb and confidence wholly wanting in him when they had met. He was brisk and assertive now. And he had a vastly better job and a materially fattened pay envelope in consequence. Yes, Ovidio ought to be fond of him, after all he had done.

Probably the same cause accounted for Peggy's loyalty. She'd made good use of him for a year

and more, beginning with the panama affair. He'd run her errands, amused her, waited on her like a—like a suitor almost. No wonder she was fond of him. He felt a stab of bitterness at the thought. Friendships were bought and sold like everything else.

So much was clear—too clear, but the phenomenon of his own liking for Ovidio Vásquez P. still invited speculation, and the mystery of his late meditation concerning Peggy Carroll's claim to pulchritude continued to present a challenge to his sourly analytic mood. It was easy to see why those two continued to like him, but the sordid motive failed to explain why he liked them.

Thinking it over he was puzzled to discover that he liked those two better than any of his older friends—the friends who had proven their friendship by suffering him in his old rôle of obligee. Indeed, as far as Herbert Cornish was concerned, Ovidio and Peggy were obligees themselves!

He couldn't explain it. He was still pondering over it when Blitz, frigidly hostile, laid a letter before him.

The elaborate letterhead leered at him. Gutiérrez Hermanos, Guayaquil! More trouble over that bit of folly! The address line attracted his

eye. They wrote to Herbert Cornish personally, not to the Empire Speciality Company. And below, instead of the formal courtesy of "Very Mister Ours," he stared at the Latin warmth of "*Estimado amigo!*"

The typescript blurred a little, but its message leaped at him through a fog of words. The present he had been so chivalrous as to dispatch had been of inestimable value in the household of Carlos Gutiérrez, and the firm would be honoured to obtain the agency for Ecuador on the terms of the Empire Specialty Company's earlier proposals. In the happy event that this could still be arranged, would Mr. Cornish be so obliging as to expedite the accompanying initial order, advising his devoted friend and servant by cable?

Herbert Cornish passed a hand across a corrugated brow. Something was radically wrong with the entire science of logic. He listened absently to Blitz's acid felicitations. Every conceivable principle of selling had failed to rouse a flicker of response in Carlos Gutiérrez. But he had fallen before the first attack of an obligee!

Cornish stared, unseeing, at the joyful marginal digits of the typewritten order, at the comforting bulk of the totals, the reassuring reference to

payment against shipping documents by New York bankers. The incident in itself was suddenly insignificant. He had a breathless sense of looking beyond it at a basic truth unveiled at last. Slowly he grasped it.

"Why, of course! It's plainer than print! Everybody on earth feels friendly toward his—his obligees! It takes an effort to like the fellow who does you a favour—you can't help feeling the weight of it. But—why, that explains Ovidio and—and—and everything else!"

He seized the letter and sped straight toward the office of Edgar Lanigan, already afire with the nascent flame of an inspiration.

V

"I OUGHT to have spotted it months ago. Remember those stamps I got for Jimmy? Well, by the time I got through thanking that chap down in Guatemala for it we were friends for life. He calls me Don Heriberto and you might think we'd gone to kindergarten together. And it worked on old Rodolfo Blasco, in Maracaibo, too. Oh, the minute I got my eyes open I could see the whole principle, and I made Lanigan see it too. He's going to try it on some tough old birds in the States, he says. And they've given me all Latin America to handle without any meddling from Blitz."

Peggy Carroll regarded him with eyes which stirred a faint uneasiness in his jubilant mood. But he was still overfull of his discovery to heed anything else. He plunged on.

"Why, it works with everybody! It's worked like a charm with me. Take Ovidio Vásquez P. for instance. You never saw him the way he was

when I first picked him up—a funny, frightened, forlorn little guy. You'd never know him now for the same person. I've done about everything for him—and I can't help liking him because of it. He's—he's a sort of walking testimonial to my good deeds, see? Every time I look at him I swell a little and tell myself what a practical philanthropist I am."

Peggy nodded, smiling a queer, twisted little smile. It puzzled him, like the look in her eyes. He had a random memory of the same look in the eyes of a school-teacher in his kindergarten days. Peggy was always reminding him of somebody, he thought, inconsequently. Queer.

"Yes, sir—it's a universal human weakness," he declared. "Take Katy—she used to adore me when I let her do everything under the sun for me. She's got no use for me now because I wait on myself. Even my father feels differently toward me because I'm supporting myself."

Peggy's smile softened a little. "And I suppose you like me because I'm everlastingly letting you run errands for me?"

He stopped short, feeling his ears redden. He ought to have foreseen this before elucidating his discovery. He groped for words, comforted to

find no resentment in her steady, queerly penetrant inspection.

"And why does Ovidio keep on liking you, for that matter?" She spared him the need of answering the harder question. "He isn't pretending about it. I've talked to him and he—he just about adores you. How does your theory account for that?"

He scowled. She was right. There couldn't be any doubt about Ovidio's affection. Suddenly light came to him. He saw, with a sense of helplessness, that while he had been educating Ovidio Vásquez P.—!

"Why, the little scoundrel has been doing twice as much for me as I ever did for him! He's taught me all I know about Spanish; he's steered me past dozens of fool mistakes; he's responsible for the best work I've done."

He shook his head. "I guess it's no use. I'll always be riding the saw—letting the other fellow do my work." He stopped as her earlier question came back to him. "Why—why, you too! I never realized it, Peggy! I've been strutting about imagining that I was doing things for you—feeling all puffed up over getting you a hat or giving you a lift in father's car! And all the time

you've been doing things for me—no, don't say it! I've got my eyes open now. You've kept me human! You've prevented me from making myself the absolutely selfish animal I was bound to be! You've let me do things for you that you'd rather have done for yourself, just to give me the fun of feeling magnificent and mighty! Why, Peggy, you wouldn't like me any more than Ovidio would if all the time I hadn't been your obli——”

He stopped. It suddenly became of less than no importance to establish the reasons why Peggy liked him, or why he liked her. The fact itself was all that could conceivably matter, now and hereafter.

But later, as he bawled cheerfully to Katy, demanding to know the whereabouts of his handkerchiefs, and heard the old eager lift in her answering hail, “Wan minutt, Herbie,” he understood better. The only real obliger is, after all, the obligee.

WILD CARROT

I

JUD WYATT woke to the sound of hurrying metal, his ears filled with the quickstep of wheels clicking over rail joints, the creak and whine of couplers and of wooden beams, all distinct and clear above the deeper note of the train. A sharp acid smell rose from the littered trash on which he lay. For a moment the noise and odour pacified the uneasiness which had disturbed his sleep, so that he did not open his eyes. He knew where he was and how he had come there.

But some deeper instinct resisted the comfortable reassurances of ear and nostril. Something in him rebelled against a new submergence in sleep. As his brain cleared this same intuition restrained him from lifting his eyelids wide. He looked out through lashes, to see slanting slices of grey light thrusting through the cracks about the broken door. And in the same covert glance he

saw the three men who moved toward him—saw and knew them for what they were.

Yeggs, these three—human wreckage in which a trace of strength survived. He watched them as they converged upon him with laughing, evil faces, their shoulders lowered, their arms bent inward at the elbow. He lay quite still, one arm outflung on the litter, but a hot, joyous excitement throbbed in him so that he seemed to hear his nerves singing like taut wires in a wind, felt a dancing tempo in his pulses. The uproar of the train smoothed into an expectant hush.

The pleasurable tension deepened as he saw one of the three pause and pull a gun. He would have liked to laugh at the odds against him. He recognized the man with the gun now: Fish. They had been in the same jail somewhere, and he had heard admiring whispers of Fish. A hard guy. Somehow the recognition heightened his enjoyment as one of the others crept in close and stooped above him, one hand patting the pocket of his coat. He waited till the fellow moved between him and the gun. Then his relaxed arm lifted and hooked tight about the man's neck. In the same motion his body was erect, the spring of his knee and thigh aided by the involuntary straightening of his victim.

He laughed softly. His elbow tightened and he jack-knifed forward from the hip. The other man stumbled backward, out of balance. Wyatt's knee struck him in the stomach and a whinnying scream broke from him—a cry as rare and hideous as the shriek of a horse in pain. He went limp in Wyatt's grip. Wyatt laughed again, and threw him on Fish, as he might have thrown a half-filled grain sack. They went down together and Wyatt whirled to the sidling rush of the third. He scarcely felt the impact of a fist on his cheek bone. He laughed once more and struck twice, choosing his mark deliberately just below the flattened chest. He slipped to the side, evading the clumsy attempt to clinch, and struck again. Fish, half-way to his feet, tripped his mate as he staggered back. They fell, sprawling with a favouring swerve of the car.

Wyatt's spring carried him to the door. He turned for a final look at his work, and his lip drew flat above his teeth at the sight—three of them, and a gun, and all on their faces! A glow of contempt warmed him. Hard guys, eh? Bad men? They weren't hard enough or bad enough for this job! He thrilled to a sense of power, exhilarating like a drug.

The door rolled back under his thrust while Fish

scrambled for a footing in the trash. He hesitated on the sill as the fit of the overgrown right of way warned him of the train's speed.

For an instant he meditated staying, fighting it out. But Fish had found his feet now, and the gun glittered. He saw death in the distorted face above it, and leaped up and out with the yelp of the shot in his ears.

A moment of free flight and he struck the slope of a cut, struggling to keep his feet against a power which suddenly wiped out his exulting consciousness of strength, flung him forward so that his face found the gravel before his hands, dragged him over briars and flints and brought him up against a sapling with a snapping jerk which wrencheded every muscle in him.

He lay where he stopped, shaken and a little sick, an army of separate pains tearing at him, all the lust and heat of his fight gone from him. The clatter and roar of the train jeered at him, dulled and died in the distance before he rose. He tested warily for broken bones, and a feeble afterglow of pride came to him as he found himself unhurt except for torn skin and bruised muscles. Mighty few men could have made that jump without paying more than a few scratches for it. He

grinned again at the thought of the fight, the picture of the three startled, stupid faces turned toward him as he sprang.

His black felt hat hung in a bramble close by him. He put it on, becoming aware now of half his coat, which dangled from an elbow. He threw it off, scowling. There was a long rip in his overalls, through which he saw the play of lean muscles, but the flannel shirt had taken no harm. He could do without the coat easily enough, but its loss brought him back to a sullen realization of folly.

The three yeggmen would have frisked him, of course, for money or drink or tobacco. That was natural, inevitable. No sensible working stiff would have expected anything else of the situation, or objected to the process—especially if his pockets, like Wyatt's, were already empty. It would have been perfectly simple to submit, knowing that when they found nothing on him they would let him alone, perhaps even stand him drink or tobacco out of their own supply. If he had not yielded to the urge of a fighting impulse he could have travelled on to the end of the division with them in comfortable peace; even profited perhaps, by their familiarity with the business of beating a passage west.

As it was he had taken a few heavy blows, risked a bullet, run a good chance of breaking his neck, by a crazy jump out into the middle of nowhere. He cursed himself silently as he climbed the bank of the cut for a look at the country. A fighting fool!

The land fell away before him in long, easy billows, checkerboarded in green and gold by square fenced fields of wheat stubble and corn and clover, with straight yellow lines of road lifting and falling past farms—farms with huge painted barns and towering silos, with cheerful houses set in clumps of shade. The sun had barely lifted clear of the eastward rim and the light came toward him across a shining sea of dew. A great clamour of birds filled the air; clear and far away he heard the bugling of roosters, and the sound, strained and sweetened by distance, stirred dim, pleasurable melancholy memories.

He shook his head and his lips drew straight and flat. A mean country, he thought, for a man afoot, with its naked roads. His self-anger quickened at the thought of dusty, sun-scorched miles, with no cover of woodlands, the ready outrush of dogs, the distrustful hostility of men and women.

"A fightin' fool," he muttered. And he cursed himself again. "I had it comin' to me."

His eye travelled over the fields intelligently. Alien as these friendly mellow lands were to his memories of farming country he saw them with a certain understanding, noted the height and vigour of the corn, the healthy green where potato rows had all but merged in an unbroken mat of growth. He measured and appraised the cattle grazing in the pasture just before him, and his eye narrowed at the sight of a dozen horses grouped beside a bare-banked brook.

"Pretty soft," he told himself. "Long past sunup and nobody at work." He observed the distant chimneys and saw no smoke. "All in bed," he guessed. "Pretty soft farmin'."

He climbed a fence and walked through deep grass to the brook. The chill of the water stung the raw abrasions on his face and hands and his scowl returned at the reminder. He crossed the pasture and emerged on a road, compressed by wire fences to a straight gash between the fields. He walked with the shuffling stiff-kneed step of the cities, and his broken shoes lifted little puffs of dust, so that his dew-drenched trousers were yellowed to the knee.

He kept his eyes straight before him, narrowed against the sun, already hot enough to sting his

cheek. He had no plan. Something urged him away from the rails, and he yielded sullenly. After all, one city was the same as another; it wasn't worth the trouble it cost to experiment. And he needed food anyway. Pretty soon these lazy farmers would be up and at their breakfasts. He'd eat, first of all. After that—he did not follow the thought. It didn't matter much what happened, after breakfast. He tightened the strap which did duty as belt, suddenly conscious of an aching hunger.

He turned in at the first farm he reached, grinning scornfully at the double line of maples flanking a curved drive, the smooth barbered turf below them, the clean white of the house shining through trained vines and climbing roses. Gentleman farming, he thought, with a sullen amusement in the phrase—some rich man playing at it as at a game. There were cushioned rockers on a recessed porch behind white columns, a box hammock. As he rounded the corner he saw an open door and a small car beyond it. They even had a garage, eh? Again he grinned his contempt.

He stopped short before the silent challenge of a man who emerged from the side door and stood surveying him with even, understanding eyes—a

man lean and straight like a spear, so that his white beard and hair seemed somehow to accentuate the strength and alertness of him. Wyatt met the eyes squarely, as if the conflict of glances were a test of strength; his instinct compelled him to accept their scrutiny as he accepted any other summons to fight. And he was dimly aware, for once, of an inspection in which he detected neither compassion nor contempt. This man studied him, read him, and yet, Wyatt felt, did not despise him.

"Well?"

The voice was crisp without harshness. In some mysterious fashion it lessened Jud Wyatt's combative impulse. He answered evenly.

"I thought you might stake me to breakfast." There was no plea in his tone. He merely stated a fact. "I fell off a freight, back there a ways."

"Tramp, eh?" The eyes did not change. Wyatt's surliness resented the word rather than the tone.

"No—lookin' for work. Plenty of jobs in Detroit."

The eyes regarded him with the same steadiness. "Farmer, to begin with, weren't you?"

Jud Wyatt arrested a denial at the point of

utterance. After all, this man was a farmer himself. On his lips the word lost its flavour of offence. He nodded.

"Grew up on a farm." He glanced about him. "Not much like this, though." The contrast loosened his tongue. "Vermont—best crop you get is stones."

"I've heard so." The eyes forsook their grip on Wyatt's, and moved deliberately, as if appraising the power in his wire-lean shoulders. "Got tired of it, did you?"

"Soon as I grew up I beat it, quick." Wyatt chuckled. "All a fellow could do to wrassle a livin' out o' the rocks."

"H'm. City didn't treat you very much better, did it?" The glance made him aware of his faded, torn overalls, the stained shirt and broken shoes. He scowled, more at the memory of what the cities had done to him than at the implication of the question.

"Not much." He tightened his fists and his eyes narrowed. The farmer chuckled without mirth.

"But you're bound for Detroit, eh? Going to try it again? Even if you have to beg your way from men who stayed by the land? Why?"

Wyatt's scowl deepened. The suggestion was wholly new to him, forcing him to think, and he hated thinking.

"Nothin' in farmin'," he said slowly.

The other laughed. "Depends on what you call farming, and where you try it. I've farmed a pretty fair house out of the land right here—and pretty good living for me and my family. Forty years back I worked by the day on this place. I've seen men do worse in the city."

Again the words prodded Wyatt's brain uncomfortably. He felt as if he groped, blindfolded, toward an elusive, mocking light. Something was wrong somewhere with an established conviction that only fools stuck to the farms, that only bone-cracking work repaid them for their folly. The leisured, tolerant manner of this farmer appealed at once to his envy and his contempt. It must be nearing six, and the man could stand on his steps and talk to a passing hobo; shiftless—and yet shiftless farmers didn't own houses like this and run automobiles. He remembered suddenly the smokeless chimneys he had seen at sunrise, the work horses idle in their pasture, cows still waiting to be milked. Somehow all of these things pointed to a meaning which still evaded him.

"You made a living, didn't you, on your poor land up in Vermont? Well, a man who could stay alive there could get rich here—with half the work. I could use you myself—and they'll offer you work at any house you find from here to Bath. Two dollars a day and your keep. Some will pay more, but they wouldn't feed you what you'll get here. I believe in treating my men as well as I treat my stock. Some farmers don't."

Wyatt's brain cleared suddenly. That was it of course! These people were soft—soft with easy land and easy living. They didn't know what work was, any of them—getting up in broad daylight and wasting time on passing tramps. He was intensely conscious of superiority as the meaning of the other's comparison came home to him. That was where he had made his mistake—in choosing the cities, where he was an outsider, instead of seeking fat farming country where what he knew could be made to pay him a price for the bitter learning of it.

He saw himself as a wolf among so many sheep here in these soft, rich fields, where the clock, instead of the sun, measured the day's work, where a man might scratch lazily at the ground and find great houses just below the surface, and motors and money and idleness!

"I'll take that job," he announced sharply. "Give me some grub and I'll show you the work all right. I guess I been playing myself for a mark, all along."

He ate hugely in a wide, low-ceiled kitchen smelling of cookies and bacon and coffee, deliberately watching the woman who supplied his needs. She was like the country, he thought, soft and friendly—easy, he amended. Her yellow hair had been carefully dressed; the print dress was fresh and clean. Even her shoes were neat—white canvas slippers with heels that clicked on the scrubbed planks of the floor. Her arms were bare to the elbow and he noticed the softness and whiteness of them as he wolfed the food they set before him. Somehow her good humour impressed him as an omen. A soft country, where even the men and women were like the land. He endured her amiable raillery in silence, but as he reached the door he turned and flashed a deliberate look into her eyes. A final jest collapsed weakly on her lips. He saw a quick colour flood into her face. And he went out to the barn with a laugh between his teeth. Fat lands, lazy men, soft white women.

II

ALWAYS they had beckoned to him furtively behind his father's bent back, figures that moved persuasively in alluring shadows, sometimes mocking, sometimes friendly and eager. At first they had been children at play, romping boys with dogs and ponies, tops and kites and bicycles. Somewhere, out and down beyond the rim of the hills, boys were like that. He had known this ever since the time when the big automobile, rashly attempting the hill paths, had broken down a few rods from the gate and he had listened to the talk of the boy who had travelled in it.

"'F I had my bicycle here I could ride right home on it. Say, lemme take yours."

He could remember, years afterward, shaking his head sullenly in answer to the flicker of questions which had followed the confession that he had no bicycle to lend. No pony, either? No dog, even? Well, they could play, then. They could fly his kite.

"I got to work," he said finally, and climbed the fence back to the jagged bit of grassland where he was hand-raking the weedy hay his father's scythe had cut that morning. The city boy had sat on the fence and watched him, clearly impressed with the spectacle of a boy who had to work and could work, barefooted in thorny stubble. His silence had led to whistles and hoots of derision.

"Yah! Got to work—got to work!"

He found himself suddenly standing over the boy's city clothes, his fists clenched, his lips drawn tight and flat about his teeth, secretly amazed at the ease of his victory. The man in the queer leather leggings routed him and rescued his victim, but he went back to the rake with something to think about, slowly and methodically, as he worked.

Some boys didn't have to work. Discounting something of what he had heard as empty boasting, it was clear that the boy he had knocked off the fence possessed things and privileges Jud Wyatt had never even wanted. A bicycle, dogs, things to play with. "An' I licked him 'thout half tryin'," he told himself.

The deduction suggested itself: If he lived near enough to that boy's house he could take those

things away from him whenever he chose. The idea rooted firmly during the long afternoon under the stabbing sun. Gradually it expanded into his possessing dream of a wonderland below and beyond the hills, where boys had everything they wanted—boys he could lick with one hand tied beyond his back.

"I'm goin' down there when I'm growed up," he promised himself, fighting back sleep under the shingles. "If the rest are like him I could git anything I want—jest take it off'n 'em."

Later, as bicycles and toys lost their appeal, he substituted other desires, but the vision endured, and the purpose. His opinion of lowlanders was confirmed, too, by the specimens of the breed who found their way into the hills; he and his father often made an easy dollar or two by pulling a helpless car out of the ford in the run, while its owners scrambled uselessly about on the bank or sat still in their leather seats—soft folks, all of them, easy prey for such as Jud Wyatt.

He kept his idea to himself, as an inventor hides his discovery. But he heard of other boys, older than he, who put his plan to the test before he was ready. They were always drifting down from the hill farms, and none of them came back, except to

visit sometimes, to show their fine clothes and spend their money grandly. What he heard of them and from them deepened his conviction, stiffened his intent. He was shrewd enough to wait his time, though. He could handle the boys down there in the soft rich country, but the men would be too much for him until he was a man himself. He made cannily sure of this by forcing a fight on a summer visitor, who fished the hill brooks when Jud was sixteen, and who presented him with a workmanlike thrashing. He saw that it would be safer to wait.

Hattie Flint knew a little of his dream. Her father's farm marched with the Wyatt place and Hattie was half a year older than Jud, a lean brown girl almost as hard as Jud himself; as silent, too, and with something in her eyes sometimes which frightened him a little. He saw her nearly every night when he drove the cow down from the pasture lot and Hattie, on the same errand, passed along the line fence. Once, as he caught the full power of her eyes on his own, a queer thought came to him: If Hattie had been a boy she could have whipped him—a thing which he had proved was beyond any other boy of his age or near it. Somehow the thought attracted him. It lent a certain

appeal to Hattie to regard her as a possible conqueror.

He observed thereafter the wiry strength of her, the quick sureness of her step, the trick of balance which carried her safely and fast along the lip of the gully, where he clambered and clung when he passed that way. And thinking of her secretly as in some sense his superior he revealed a little of his plan, not freely nor at once, but in random grudged snatches as they stopped in the pasture at sun-down.

"You'll come back if you go," said Hattie when he spoke of the projected descent upon the plains.

Sometimes he tried to make her enlarge on the statement, annoyed at what seemed a doubt of his ability to hold his own down there. But always she shook her head and the queer look came into her eyes, the look that made him feel that she could have whipped him if she had been another boy. Once, when he ventured to suggest that girls probably had better times down there, too, she laughed softly and pushed her straight, heavy hair back from her face.

"I've seen a sight of 'em," she said, and her voice rasped like a fine file.

He could not tease another word from her, then or later, on the topic. But the speech inspired him to watch the women who came through the hills in the cars, which had ceased to be curiosities now, in the hope of seeing what Hattie had seen in them, the thing which could bring that edged contempt into her tone.

He saw many things, but never that. They gave him another vision of the wonderland beyond the hills, added another secret resolve, a dream of which he thought with a queer breathless quickening of pulse, a pricking tingle in his cheeks. They were wonderfully different from the women of the hills—from Hattie, for instance, and her mother. Even the old ones were smooth of cheek and red of lip and soft of voice; they were mysterious, disturbing creatures, touched with the charm of the unknown. Their clothes seemed somehow part of them; they were white and pink, and he guessed, with a sullen defiance of an inner jeer, that an arm would find their bodies warm and yielding. Men who lived down there had everything else a man could crave; and as if that were not enough, they had women like these—women with soft, rose-coloured hands and little, lovely

feet, and silken ankles so small a hand could compass them.

Somewhere down in the fat lands there would be a woman like that for Jud Wyatt—a woman he would take away from some weaker man as he would take that man's other possessions. The new vision seized his major fancy, now. He could think of nothing else. When he met Hattie Flint in the hill pasture it was to contrast her with those other women, to match their white softness against her wire-hard brown arms, their delicate fingers against her toughened hands, their gossamer ankles against the awkward cowhide of Hattie's heavy shoes. He grew afraid to meet Hattie's eyes, in these days, lest she guess what went on behind his own. He looked, instead, at her hands and her shoes and the ugly clothes. Somehow she came to typify the hill country in his sight, and the other women to stand as symbols of the kindlier lands below.

He waited, working almost without consciousness, while the slow years made a man of him. He heard of more and more young fellows who had adventured out beyond the rims which still imprisoned him. A few of them came back, but none stayed. Within a ten-mile circle of the

Wyatt farm there were a dozen empty houses, little, toil-won clearings already disappearing under eager overgrowth.

He listened to the talk of the elders, and a slow scorn of them waked in him. They complained of hard times, of dwindling crops, of the want of help. And yet they stayed here, grown men, whom nothing restrained from going down into the lands where weak-backed folk grew rich and lived softly!

The secret project sustained him as he grew into lean, work-bitten manhood. He scarcely realized the bitterness of the endless fight against Nature by which he and his father lived, the narrow margin of their success. It was only for a little while, he told himself, in the short moments between his weary relaxation on the husk mattress and the swift, engulfing sleep. It didn't matter. Pretty soon he'd be down there, down in the fat lands. He dreamed sometimes of snatching toys from flabby, white-faced boys; of a soft-fingered woman who would smile at him as he thrust a puny rival out from between them.

By hill standards he and his father did well. They picked the endless succession of stones from their ploughland; they stacked hay and carried their

stock through the long winters in good flesh. Abel Wyatt owed no man a dollar, and even saved a little store of musty bills. Jud understood his own part in this prosperity; other men openly envied his father such a son. The two were on good terms of silence, singularly alike. Jud had a certain pride in his father, a pride which rested chiefly on tales of epic fights in the timber days, the ridges of warped muscles he could watch under the damp shirt in the hay time. Once Abel Wyatt voiced his son's own thought as he pocketed the price of two calves sold to the butcher from the Corners at a figure over which the buyer all but wept.

"It takes a good man to stay alive up here. I calc'late we're a mite better'n good men, Jud." And clumsily he halved the money. "Guess you earnt more o' this than I did, Jud."

Jud put the bills away in a chink in the wall. A little money would help him mightily when he left the hills behind. He might as well stay on until he could carry down a filled pocket. He'd stay through the summer and then take his share of the crops and go, before the winter clamped him fast again. He worked fiercely, counting his gains shrewdly as he picked stones and followed his

plough or chopped weeds from the young corn or swung his scythe on the steep slant of the grassland.

In mid-July Abner Flint died. His wife had long since surrendered to her rheumatism, and the farm work fell to Hattie, single-handed except for what help the two Wyatts could give her. Abel spoke about her sometimes, admiringly.

"Mighty near as handy as a man, that girl o' Flint's. Abner never run the place no better'n she's a-runnin' it."

Jud grunted assent, his thoughts busy with a picture of Hattie, her arms bare, swinging her father's scythe. And beyond her, blurred but alluring, he saw a vision of the other women—the women with fragile hands and mysterious perfumes, beckoning to him with a sort of furtiveness, as if Hattie might see and interfere. He would have helped her oftener after these meditations, out of a kind of self-reproach, if she had taken his proffers kindly. But except when necessity drove she had a way of rejecting them curtly. He could understand this. Hattie liked to think she was as able as any man.

He did not get away that autumn, after all. His father found the only argument which would have stood against his sullen resolution. They had

been cutting corn since sunrise, and the day, surprisingly for September, had been fiercely hot. Jud came in with his milk pails, to find Abel helpless on the kitchen floor, the lumped, rigid muscles curiously horrible in their sudden futility. He had seen another man in such a state and knew what it meant. The doctor from the Corners only confirmed his guess.

"He might live quite a while, Jud, but he'll never work again. Lucky he's got a son like you. Old Marsh Whittemore would be alive if his boy had stayed home. Died in a stroke just like this, because nobody was there to see to him. Just let him take things easy while he lasts. Guess he's earned it."

Jud Wyatt said nothing. He was conscious of a dull impatience at the check, but from the first there was no question of carrying out his plans. He was not deeply fond of his father, but an obligation against which he had no thought of rebellion bound him to the petty service of the sick room more effectually than affection could have accomplished it. He did two men's work that winter, and a woman's besides, sourly patient, borne up by multiplying proofs of his sufficiency. Without understanding why, he rebuffed Hattie

Flint's proffers of help with the nursing. He felt dimly that the mere offer involved a reflection on his adequacy, and resented it.

He fitted the ploughland, in a tardy spring, from force of habit. It was clear to him that the time of his release was very near, even before the doctor told him. Abel Wyatt was breaking up swiftly, his huge strength a burden on his stricken body, his mind touched with a querulous childlikeness, his intervals of lucidity given to concern over the farm work, which annoyed Jud as implying a want of confidence. He felt no grief when the old man slept his way out of life. Abel Wyatt was better dead. And Jud was free, with their common property to help him on his way.

He had arranged for an auction of the household goods and farm equipment before he followed Abel up the rocky lane to the family burying ground on the crest, conscious that the neighbours who walked with him were all old, bent men and women.

Hattie Flint did not come to the funeral. Her mother had been taken bad, she sent word. He was a little relieved. Hattie's eyes made him uncomfortable still—more uneasy than ever. A better man than he was, they seemed to say—able to whip him if she had been a boy.

She came to the sale, however, and bid in a few of the farm tools. He observed that the other bidders dropped out after her voice had spoken once or twice, but the effect on his pocket did not annoy him. It soothed his self-regard a little to feel that Hattie was indirectly accepting something like a gift at his expense. He tried to give her a few things withheld from the sale or remaining when it was over, but she insisted on paying for them—a narrow price, to be sure, but still a price. He helped her carry them home. She gave him supper in her shining kitchen, moving efficiently from stove to table and in and out of the inner room where her mother lay in bed.

He said little, and she seemed even less inclined to words. He was vaguely oppressed by a sense of desertion. When he had gone there would be no neighbour within two steep miles. But he shook off the thought. Hattie could look out for herself well enough, and it was no affair of Jud Wyatt's anyway.

She came out to the gate with him when he left; the sun already hidden behind the westward hills, the valley a green pool of shadows, a sudden, premonitory coolness in the air.

"Well, good-by, Hat." He paused awkwardly,

kicking at a tall spray of wild carrot with the bulged toe of his new shoe. "Much obliged for the supper."

"You're bound to go, Jud?"

The question startled him, angered him feebly. Did she think he was a fool, to sell out before his mind was made up?

"Guess so."

"Well, good-by," she said.

A whining call came from the house and quickened his departure. He turned at the bend and looked back. Hattie had not moved from her place at the gate, waist deep in the flat, ash-silver fronds of the carrot. He waved his arm clumsily and went on.

As he passed his own gate he stopped again. The windows had been shuttered, the weather-worn door closed and locked. He felt suddenly a sense of absurdity in these precautions. Locking the door, as if the house still held something of value! Why, it looked as if he expected to come back! He went quickly up the weedy walk, turned the key and kicked the door wide. Then with a consciousness of release he tramped down toward the Corners and the railroad.

Twenty-four hours later he lay on a bare wooden

bench in the cell room of a Boston police station, listening to the cheerful uproar of a drunken boy in the opposite cage. The store clothes he wore had lost their uncomfortable newness; the coat was split down the back, and the slimy black ooze of the paved street had begun to dry and stiffen where he had rolled in it. His head throbbed savagely where the night stick had lifted a great welt, and his wrist was raw from the chafing of a chain handcuff. The money he had brought with him from the hills had gone, and he knew that he faced serious trouble in the morning, when they would take him into court. But he was fiercely triumphant, nevertheless.

He had been right, all along. There was no pith in these people. He chuckled mirthlessly as he went back over the panic in the bar when he discovered that the friendly woman had picked his pocket.

He still saw her as a conquest—she had chosen him, of all the passing crowd on the narrow walk. And she had been like the women he had studied as they passed in their cars or stopped for rest or water at the farm—soft and white and silken, a thing of wonderfully fragile fingers and strange heady scents, who laughed at nothing and hummed

a funny little song. As for robbing him, he bore no malice. That was part of the game as they played it down here, he saw. It would be different next time.

But the memory of what had happened when she had left him alone at the little table, and he felt for the worn wallet that had been his father's—this fired him like strong drink. He could see the sudden startled turning of white faces, the scurry and press to clear his path, the deliberate, confident advance of the bull-necked man who blocked his rush while the girl escaped. He touched the tender spot on his cheek bone where the fist had landed before he got his hands on the fat short neck. Others had interfered, he knew—three or four others. He remembered getting solidly home with his foot on one of them. Then police, first one and then two more; it had taken four of them to handle him, and every one of them bore his mark before they got him into the wire-screened motor.

Soft, puny people, just as he had always thought. It didn't matter what they did to him in the morning. He'd been right, from the beginning about them. A man who could stay alive in the hills could be a king down here. He slept in spite of the clamour across the narrow passage, and in

the morning listened unmoved to a judicial lecture ending in a suspended sentence conditioned on his leaving town. They were afraid of him, eh? Well, they'd better be!

He ignored the warning to get out of the city, and found a job on the docks, unloading bananas from a new, white-painted steamer. It was easy work; the hours amused him and the pay offered was hardly believable. At noon a shambling fellow worker demanded a look at his card. Argument followed. He discovered that he was forbidden to work except as a member of something called a union. It was pure instinct to defy such an edict. At quitting time he found seven or eight of them waiting for him menacingly, and welcomed this appeal to the kind of reasoning he preferred. He slept in a city hospital that night, and was discharged late next day, with seven stitches under a bandage which he tore clear before he had walked a square.

He found new work easily enough, this time in the shipping room of a wholesale-provision house. There was no union here, but the confinement oppressed him, the routine of wheeling an interminable procession of cases across a fifty-foot strip of floor teased shrewdly at his nerves. The fore-

man cursed him for some trivial fault. He dropped his truck and sprang at the man like a cat. The other workmen separated them—not easily—and Wyatt gathered himself painfully from foul cobbles after a fall from the waggon-platform.

He drifted from one job to another, always with the same result—a growing hatred of the dull task; a contempt for the men who worked beside him, seemingly contented or apathetic, humble under reproof; an outburst of violence, ending in discharge or the police court.

He served several short terms in county jails for these affairs, suffocated in the crowding walls and the dead evil air. Here he encountered men who talked in sidewise whispers of the road, of migrations on the brake beams of freight cars, of jobs involving little labour and paying huge profits in return for risk. He listened, tempted sometimes to join them, but holding back under a restraint he did not seek to understand.

But he learned their way of travel and used it, trying one city after another, never conquering but never conquered, his belief in himself undiminished, his hatred of the weaker men who combined against him constantly deepening, and with it his contempt. He had still less respect for the

vagrants who rode the rods, readily sensing their inferiority even to the stooped, spindly men who coughed contentedly in lint-laden cotton mills or inhaled the poisonous dust of paint works. Among the wanderers he held his own easily; they did not run to the police when he bested them, like the plodding workmen.

And when he thought of the hills, even while he choked in a venomous cell, he had no regrets. Anything was better than the life he had left behind him up there.

He was twenty-three when the accident of the fight in the box car flung him out into the rich farmlands of the low country and gave him his first understanding of his mistake.

III

A WEEK was enough to toughen his hands and brown his face, to harden the disused muscles to the half-forgotten tasks. It sufficed, too, to confirm his first impression of the land and its people. He studied both between narrowed eyelids, warily concealing a mounting contempt for the men and a steadily deepening wonder at the soil.

After the first breakfast he was fed and lodged at a lesser house, where a permanent hand and his wife furnished board for the more transient labour. The food was better and more plentiful than any diet he had known. He felt his strength grow in him as he ate, and listened in silence to the whining grumble of the other boarders. His bed was clean and comfortable, and he did not mind the heat which sometimes lingered until bedtime in the metal roof above him. He had no wish to fraternize with the others, and accepted their hostility with something like satisfaction. They reminded him of men he had met in his wander-

ings; away from familiar surroundings they would be lost dogs. Here they were given to boastings, to braggart tales of their smartness, to rehearsals of their repartees, to flat foul anecdote at which they sniggered and slapped knees.

But the land fascinated him like a miracle. He loved to kick at the crumbling loam between the corn rows, to run a handful between his fingers, feeling the warm dampness of it against his calloused skin like a caress. There was one field of bottom soil with fifty acres within its square-cornered fences and as level as a floor, out of which potatoes thrust up flowering vines that seemed to grow while he watched them.

He marvelled at the horses—huge Clydesdales and rangy Hambletonians, in such condition as no hill horseflesh had ever been; at the milk machines which they called cows here in the flat, fat country; at the size of the mows and bins. But he grinned sourly at the implements—lazy men's tools, with seats on them, even to cultivators and ploughs and harrows; at the side-delivery hayrakes, which whirled the hay into long windrows to be straddled by a racked waggon dragging a loading device; at the power sprayer, which covered four rows of potatoes faster than a man could walk. They

were afraid of work, he told himself, these flatland men; any one of them would starve in the hills. And the conscious superiority which he troubled less and less to hide increased the suspicion and dislike with which they regarded this sulky, silent tramp whom Matthew Bray had thrust upon their company.

Toward Matthew Bray himself he entertained a different sort of scorn. The old man did no work whatever with his own hands; he wore white clothes, invariably spotless, and drove about his fields in a light buckboard drawn by a bay colt. He dealt leniently with his men, speaking them gently, with suggestions rather than orders. "Charley, don't you and Bill want to draw that jag of oats down from the east lot?" Or: "Harris, guess you might as well go to cutting that alfalfa after dinner."

Jud Wyatt saw the others taking advantage of his tolerance in a dozen ways, and, despising them, despised Bray the more. Lucky for the lot of them they hadn't been born in the hills, where you worked or starved or froze!

He worked willingly himself, less for the sake of any honest impulse than from a sullen pride in his strength. As the newcomer, the harder tasks fell

naturally to him, and he accepted them with a sour pleasure. Two dollars a day—a clear fifty a month, of which he need not spend a penny. In a year he would have five hundred, or nearer six—more than he and his father had saved in a lifetime and a half!

"It's two dollars more'n you're worth—or two like you," he snarled suddenly when Charley Graney grumbled over his wage. "Where I come from we'd do two days' work before you're awake."

"I see you got rich doin' it," said Charley.

The others whinnied approval, and Jud, unclenching his hands, drew back into himself. He could beat them all, but what use? There were better things to be done.

He found the working day absurdly short, measured by the standards born in him. Eight hours in a factory seemed an eternity, but ten hours at the farm labour was absurdly little; there were two good hours of daylight before these people stirred in their beds. They quit while the sun was another hour short of setting, wasting their twilight on the porch of the boarding house. Slowly he conceived a plan for turning his own wasted daylight to account. There was no need of stopping at two dollars a day, when he woke

at the first slant of the dawn and was unwearied when the quitting bell boomed over the fields.

He had noticed a huge heap of stove wood, sawed to fourteen-inch lengths and halved or quartered with the ax, but still to be split before it could be burned. It lay along the fringe of the woodlot on the adjoining farm. He asked a question or two and tramped over to interview the owner, a slow-spoken, bulbous man of sixty-five or more, who smoked comfortably in a splint chair and listened approvingly to Jud's proposal. He got out stove wood for winter sale in Athens and Millersville, but he hadn't got round to splittin' yet and reckoned he might as well wait till farm work eased up.

"What'd you pay, if you waited?"

"Might have to go as high as sixty cents a cord —pilin' an' splittin' both."

"I'll do it now for fifty," said Jud. "I got some spare time I'd like to use."

He was willing to take forty. He knew that he could make wages at even less than that. Michael Raker dropped in his regard when he accepted the first offer. Soft, like the rest of them! Thereafter he had a use for the time between dawn and breakfast, tramping across a dew-wet pasture in

the cool of the sunrise. He put in another hour or more at night, and on Saturday afternoons, when the rest knocked off for their weekly trip into town, he chuckled as he watched them go, and counted the extra gain he made by staying in the woodlot. He worked there every Sunday as well, till the pile was done, and Raker settled with him, complaining of the measure of his stacked cords, trying, in an indolently persistent fashion, to cheat him in the account. Wyatt chuckled at the ease with which the issue was decided—merely the closing of his fists, the narrowing of his eye, seemed to convince Raker that honesty would pay best. Soft people!

Sometimes on his early journeys he caught a glimpse of a wispy figure in a faded black coat dodging about between the crowding boles of the woods. He had already learned who Andy was—Old Andy Weeds, they called him at the farm. Sometimes he had seen the old fellow close by, at work in the pastures and grasslands, with his half-bushel basket of hickory strips overflowing with daisy or wild carrot or dock, and had marvelled at the lowland trick of hand-weeding their meadows. In the hills they were glad enough to get the hay in, weeds and all. As for the pastures, what the stock

refused to eat grew as it pleased. There were no hands to spare for such fancywork as pulling carrot—even when the hands were trembling with age and the mind which ruled them childish again.

"Andy's a funny old nut," Graney told Wyatt, when he asked. "Crazy about pullin' weeds. Won't do nothin' else. They say he went loony when he was a kid and kep' right on doin' what he was doin' then. Bray pays him so much an acre to keep down the carrot and stuff. Lives in a shanty back o' the gully, all by himself. No harm in him. Jest simple."

At first Wyatt lost interest in the old man, thus explained. He became merely another proof that they were soft of head as well as of back, here in this fat country. But the sight of Andy among the trees at sunup revived his curiosity a little. He might be crazy, as Charley said, but he was sound in the matter of hours, at least. He didn't lie on his back while the best part of the day got away from him, even if he did waste his work on such nonsense as weeding pastures. He watched the shrunken figure thereafter with a certain sympathy. Andy worked better than the rest of them. Wyatt found himself drawn toward him by some instinct he did not understand. Once

when he was in the upper pasture after a colt he came on the old fellow at his work, stood within a few feet of him before Andy observed his presence.

"There, now—don't make such a fuss. It's all right."

He caught the words distinctly, and the voice in some queer trick of key conveyed the impression of a human listener. It was not in the least like the voice of one who talks to himself. An ancient superstition stirred in Wyatt—the reflection of progenitors to whom the witless had been at once sacred and uncanny, traffickers with old gods, seers of the unseen. But his eye appraised the figure reassuringly. The reedy arms and legs were comically frail and impotent. He could see the face now—pink and smooth and plump, like a child's, so that the thick white hair seemed not to belong to it; he might have been a boy in a powdered wig.

"I know it hurts a mite, but you'll live to thank Andy for it."

Again Wyatt had the sense of some invisible auditor and glanced uneasily over his shoulder. But there were only the tall stems of dried grasses, the sway of the stunted limbs of a thorn apple, the chirping twitter of small yellow birds in the leaves.

Andy looked up, apprehension in his pale eyes and gathered shoulders. Jud Wyatt could see a tremor in the long, laced spray of carrot gripped in the shrivelled hands. He half resented Andy's fear of him. He didn't hurt old men.

"Pullin' carrot, eh?" He spoke pleasantly, and the alarm faded out of the eyes.

"Yes-s—yes-s." The old man prolonged the sibilant hissing. "You goin' to help me? There's a sight of it."

"Not me." Jud grinned at the idea. "I'm working for Bray," he added.

Andy's face changed so that Jud detected a trace of condescension in it—something like the look with which Harris and Charley and Bill regarded him. Andy had heard about him, he guessed; knew that he was nothing but a tramp, despised him like the rest of the stupid soldiering crew. He scowled. The old man seemed to understand his thought.

"Never mind," he said kindly. "'Tain't everyone can work for *my* boss. He's sorta p'tic'lar. I thought mebbe you might be the help I been askin' for."

"I thought you worked for Bray too."

Wyatt was puzzled. Instantly Andy revealed

offence. His plump face twisted, his eyes grew bright and angry.

"Work for Matt Bray? Not me! I'm workin' for"—he dropped his voice to a tone of boyish confidence—"I'm workin' for God." He pointed skyward with a thumb, in a gesture at once furtive and prideful. "'Tain't easy. He's mighty keerless 'bout some things." He wagged his head. "Specially fences. Makes a sight o' work for me."

Wyatt grinned at the conceit. Working for God! The old bug was nuttier than they made him out to be. He waved a hand and moved away. The interview strengthened his conviction that among these people he could do as he pleased.

His wood-splitting finished, he made a new bargain with Raker, and proceeded to fell and trim the dead timber in his woodlot, in spite of the season, at a fixed price for each log he left for the hauling. He saw Andy often on his early errands amid the trees, a vague figure flitting in and out of vision among the stippling shadows, the great hickory basket in the bend of his arm, a mass of weed tops protruding. Once, coming suddenly out on the lip of a small gully where a trickling brook had cut deep into the hill, he found the old

man spattering water on a great sheaf of carrot, and his curiosity urged him to a question:

"What do you do with 'em, Andy?"

The old fellow started, straightened, plainly terrified. He studied Wyatt's eyes earnestly without speaking. The fear went out of his face and a kind of cunning replaced it. He laid a finger on his lips.

"Sh! That's a secret, that is. Mine an' God's. Nobody else knows. They wouldn't understand. They'd put the carrot in the road, like Daniel McFee, or burn it on a brush pile, like Saul Baker. They don't know what the carrot's for. But Andy knows—an' God." He chuckled shrilly, wagging his head.

Wyatt left him, faintly amused at the whimsy. The poor old fool thought there was a use for such weeds as wild carrot! He saw suddenly that Matthew Bray and his neighbours profited by the delusion; Andy fought their weeds for them for practically nothing. No wonder they put up with his insanity! He remembered old women, back in the hills, who had patiently harvested weeds—yarbs, they called them—and made medicines of them. But not even they had found a use for carrot.

He spent a few dollars on heavy boots and

clothes, but nearly all his earnings went into the bank at Athens, where a stout, silent man with a great two-pronged grey beard eyed him with a deepening attention over each deposit slip. His hands interested Wyatt—they were so swollen and so soft and white—white as a toad's belly, he thought. John Sinnot was rich, according to the farm gossip, a shrewd, grasping money-maker, lending at illegal interest and trading cannily in lands and mortgages. To Wyatt the circumstance was an added encouragement. This pulpy man whom he could throttle with one hand had grown fat on the folly of the valley folk. He could do better—far better.

He was vaguely pleased when Sinnot beckoned him inside the brass grille-work after he had banked a month's earnings and a check from Raker besides. There was a certain recognition in the gesture, as if Sinnot saw in him what the empty-headed hands at the boarding house could not see. Wyatt felt, besides, a kind of social progress in the episode. Sinnot was something more than rich and powerful—he represented something like aristocracy. The village had been founded by some ancestor of his, and its first name had been Sinnot's Mills.

He took the chair which the banker offered and waited silently for him to speak. Sinnot stroked one prong of the huge beard, a rhythmic, recurrent gesture which drew down one cheek and eyelid without disturbing the even stare of his small recessed eyes.

"Been watchin' you all summer, Wyatt," he said at last. "Thrifty, ain't you? Don't aim to spread your money out thin over the town every Sat'd'y night, eh?"

Wyatt grinned without speaking.

"Makes me sort of wonder why you keep on workin' for Matt Bray—a man like you. There's a sight of good land for sale round here. You could be workin' for yourself if you wanted to."

"Got to get more money first." Wyatt shrugged. "Might buy a place when I get ready."

"You got enough to buy one right now," said Sinnot quickly. "I got eighteen acres over on Mill Creek I'd let you have on easy terms. You could be bringin' up the land while you paid off on it. Good soil, but it hain't been worked for two—three years."

Jud was interested but wary. Sinnot had no name for benevolence.

"What'd you ask?"

"Only a thousand—a quarter down an' the rest easy—as you make it. There's a house and a good barn. About ten acres clear and the rest in second-growth timber. Just the place for a man that ain't too much afraid of work."

Wyatt felt a sudden weakening of his fixed hostility. Flabby and swollen as the man was, he saw what the rest of them overlooked. He knew that Jud Wyatt was a better man than the valley-bred wasters and idlers.

"I'll go out Sunday and take a look," he said carelessly. "I might buy if I like it."

"I'll drive you out myself," suggested Sinnot quickly. "Just as easy as not."

Wyatt shrugged. He would have preferred to inspect the property alone, but the six-mile walk would cut deeply into his usual Sunday work in the woods, and he knew that Sinnot could not sell him anything he did not want to buy.

He was rather surprised when they finished their examination. The ten-acre clearing lay flat in a wide bend of Mill Creek—rich dark loam better than any land on Matthew Bray's farm. The woodlands along the creek consisted mainly of soft-wood, but his eye told him that he could cut enough stave bolts here to pay for the place. The

buildings were paintless and dejected of surface, but he saw that their frames were sound and plumb. A little tinkering in odd minutes would make them as good as new—better than the new houses they built nowadays. He had picked up enough of land prices to know that the figure Sinnott quoted was below the average.

He spoke to Matthew Bray and Raker, and both confirmed his judgment that the place was a bargain. He bought it, paying two hundred and fifty dollars down and receiving in return a document agreeing to deliver deed and title on receipt of seven hundred and fifty more, in five semi-annual installments of a hundred and fifty each.

There was a clause in the agreement which disturbed him a little: "In the event of failure to pay any of the aforesaid semi-annual installments, the said Judson Wyatt agrees that the entire balance remaining due shall become due and payable immediately, and if not paid on demand this sale shall be null and void and the real property hereinbefore described shall in such case remain the sole property of John Sinnott."

"Just a matter of form," said Sinnott gravely. "I'm selling you this place pretty cheap, as it is, and I don't aim to be put to the expense of suit and

foreclosure if you lay down on me. This way, if you don't pay, I keep the land, without botherin' the sheriff. That's how I do business, anyway. Take it or leave it."

Jud Wyatt took it. He walked back to the Bray farm with his copy of the agreement crackling in his pocket. It seemed now as if the rolling country chuckled with him. He grinned thinly back at the smiling fields—his country, now, owning the mastery of the man who was strong.

He thought of Laura Bray, with her white arms and her slow, enveloping smile, standing in the sweet-smelling dimness of her grandfather's kitchen. Between them till today he had seen and accepted the gulf which divides all farming communities into those who own the land and those who merely labour on it. He had crossed that gulf now. And when the time came he would stretch out his hand and take the woman he wanted, the soft, white, fragile woman of his dreams.

She passed him on the road, leaning back in the seat of a scudding runabout driven by Lonnier Carlin, who had begun to practice law in his father's office in Athens. Jud Wyatt's glance ignored the gleaming little car, the trim smartness

of cap and belted jacket, and saw only the narrow shoulders and flat chest, the inward slant of the chin. He felt a laugh rise in his throat as his arms tightened and swelled. What chance would such a softling have against those arms? When the time came he would throw Lonnie Carlin out of his way as lightly as a split stick of stove wood. He touched the paper in his pocket and tramped on.

IV

WINTER drew in with an amiable deliberation. Jud left the Bray farm in October and moved into his own house, where he had installed a few essentials picked up at auction sales. A little carpentry made the roof weatherproof, the windows tight. He traded shrewdly for a cow and a few hens and feed for the winter. It was more comfortable than the old house in the hills had ever been.

Before the snow lay thick enough to halt the work he had cleared the ploughland of the over-growth of its idle years, mended the fences and roofed the barn. He worked casually for neighbouring farmers, chiefly in their woods, and slowly accumulated the money against his next payment. He had plenty of time for tinkering about his house and barn in the intervals of these labours, and he meditated daring improvements, with a thought of Laura Bray beyond them. She'd want things. A porch, for instance, where she

could swing a box hammock like the one at the Bray place; running water in her kitchen; a telephone to gossip over. Somehow he conceived of these contemptible luxuries as part of her, so many tokens and expressions of the softness which he hated in the men and admired in the women of these flat fat fields.

He felled some of his timber and cut it into peeled stave bolts, which he piled beside the road to be hauled when occasion suited. Early in the spring he made a second payment to John Sinnot and put a coat of white paint on the house. He started a garden and fitted his field for planting. He meant to work elsewhere this season, earning money for his August payment, but he knew that he could easily do what his own acres required while the valley people slept or loafed.

The winter had deepened his contempt for his neighbours. The more he dealt with them the more certain he grew of his strength and their weakness. A dozen times men had stepped back before his tightened fists, apologetic and pacific, evading the fight he offered. One—Charley Graney—had accepted a sweeping, flat-handed slap on his cheek without attempting to return the blow. He caught his grocer in an overcharge and

stood grinning while the fellow corrected the error with hands which shook visibly and lips which babbled excuses. A neighbour, coming to complain of damage done by Wyatt's cow, departed unapleased, walking swiftly and with frequent backward glances. They were afraid of him, he told himself. They could afford to be!

A dispute over a stove-wood contract broke off his relations with Raker and led to a suit before the justice of the peace in Athens. Young Lonnie Carlin represented Raker and tangled Jud Wyatt hopelessly on the stand. He lost his case and paid eighteen dollars, after a talk with Sinnot, who made him understand that it would cost him more to carry on the argument. Later, meeting Carlin in the street, he yielded to a sudden impulse and gripped the slim serge arm firmly.

"Feel that?"

"Take your hands off me!" He saw that Carlin's lips were white, and he laughed sourly.

"Just givin' you notice to keep out o' my way after this, Carlin. There's other places besides law courts—an' better ways o' findin' out who's the best man."

He dropped the arm and swaggered past, the memory of the fright in Carlin's eyes soothing the

sting of his defeat. When the time came Carlin wouldn't wait to be thrown out of his way—he'd run like a scared rabbit, at a word.

He bought himself a slow-going sturdy horse and a solidly built old-fashioned buckboard, contemptuous of appearances and speed, intent on value. He made a point of stopping at the Bray farm in his drives past, to discuss crops with Matthew Bray, who met him always with a formal courtesy. He usually saw Laura on these visits, and contrived to make it clear in her hearing that he prospered. In about another year, he told himself. Laura nodded and smiled at him pleasantly always, but he felt dimly that she understood his intent and approved. Women thought more of strength than men did. When the time came——

In late July he heard that the farm next his own was on the market, and made haste to buy it. The owner, an old man whose sons had gone to the city long before, was moving into Athens. He objected feebly to Wyatt's proffered terms of payment, but Jud, inwardly amused, overbore him, so that he signed at last with a sort of frightened eagerness, and took his cheque with a mumbling flow of thanks.

Wyatt chuckled over the memory of it. They

had begun to realize what he was, to understand the difference between his strength and their flabbiness of nerve and muscle. He had drawn most of his savings to make the payment, and to meet the next installment due to Sinnot on the original transaction, he decided to accept an offer for his stave bolts which he had left unanswered. He hired another horse and a waggon and hauled them to the siding. The buyer paid him cash when the car was loaded, after his careless promise to fix it up on Saturday had brought him face to face with Wyatt's level cold show of displeasure. He dragged the bills out of his hip pocket nervously and his hand shook as he thumbed the count.

"Just as lief pay now, Wyatt—don't make a mite o' difference to me."

Wyatt pocketed the money silently. They were all alike. They were all afraid of him. He drove to the bank and deposited the bills. John Sinnot, stroking the grey tusk of beard, eyed him pleasantly and commented on the weather. On his way back to the farm he kept to the crown of the road, enjoying the impatient hooting of a motor horn behind him. He recognized the note. It was Carlin's car. He did not look back. At the first cross-roads he saw the hood dart up toward

him, temptingly near. He drew lightly on one rein and the plodding team swerved obediently, throwing the hub of the left wheel over in time to catch the fender of the car. There was a crunch of bending metal. The car passed, stopped. He saw Carlin spring down and stoop over the crumpled guard.

"You did that on purpose, Wyatt! It'll cost you a new fender, that's all."

Wyatt grinned without answering. Carlin, his temper mounting above discretion, stepped toward him.

"You can't bully everybody in this town, Wyatt. You'd better understand right now that——"

Wyatt dropped the reins and climbed down slowly. Carlin retreated instantly to the car, its engine still humming.

"You can't settle this with your hands," he called. "I'll show you."

Jud chuckled over it as he covered the remaining mile. He knew now that Carlin would never stand up to him, whatever the provocation.

When the time came to take his girl away from him he would submit—and run—as he had done just now. There was no backbone in these flatlanders.

He saw Laura Bray on the porch as he passed the house, a white figure relaxed in the box hammock. He lifted an arm and grinned as he caught the white flutter of her answer. When he was ready he would have to do no more than that. She would come. Women knew better than men how to value hardness and strength—the softer they were themselves the better they understood men like Jud Wyatt.

V

"YOU like Lonnie Carlin?" He threw the question at her bluntly, after a comfortable silence. It was cool in the recessed porch behind the columns; there was a blent and somnolent hum of insects like a background for voices and stillness. Matthew Bray was in the village and Laura had urged him to wait. He had bought some new clothes out of the timber money—nothing like Carlin's fashionable pleats and belts, but decent serviceable stuff which fitted his straight leanness fairly well. He felt approval in the girl's glance. It prompted his sudden inquiry, that look.

She spread her hands carelessly. "Oh, yes—sort of. He's good company, and he's got a nice car."

"Reckon you'll marry him?"

He gave the impertinence a droll inflection which seemed to make an affirmative impossible. She shook her head quickly.

"No, I should say not! I'm not going to spend

my life in a dead little place like Athens. I want"—she hesitated, with an uncertain inclusive sweep of one white arm—"I want some fun before I'm old. I want to see places—big cities, you know; theatres and stores and places to eat. I'm going to stay here till I can go somewhere where it's fun to be alive."

He grinned. She'd change her mind when he was ready. Fun! Cities! A blurred memory of the cities as he had known them came to him, the close, lifeless air of them, the crowds of hurrying, undersized people, the dirt and meanness and slyness, the irksome restraints of petty laws, the strutting, bull-necked police.

"Oh, you think that's funny!" she cried, misinterpreting his smile. "You wait and see. I'm going. There's plenty of ways I can do it."

He shook his head. "I've seen 'em all—cities," he said. "They can't touch this. But I used to feel like you do, before I went. You have to find out for yourself, I reckon. You'd be glad to come back."

The words struck an echo in his brain. Where had he heard them before? He saw a sudden picture of Hattie Flint, waist deep in wild carrot, telling him as confidently that he would come back

to the hills. The contrast pleased him. He tried to recall the details of the picture, to compare Hattie, feature by feature, with this girl.

"Maybe. But I'd know, then. That's what I hate—not knowing. It's like staying home from a party. Maybe you wouldn't have a good time if you went, but you can't tell unless you go. I want to go and see."

"Well, I guess you will if you feel that way."

He rose, contemplating a new idea. It would be fun to go back to New York with Laura Bray, with decent clothes on his body and plenty of money in his pockets. He filed the thought away—a bait to be used if bait was needed.

He drove away without waiting for Bray's return, his mind still occupied pleasantly with the contrast between the life he had left behind him and the prospect which seemed to draw very near, between Hattie and the harsh endless struggle for bare survival in the hills, and Laura Bray and the placid easy life the flatlands promised.

VI

"YES. I got out an attachment on your account, Wyatt." John Sinnott's hand continued to stroke the pendent fork of his beard. "You're lucky I didn't have you arrested, too. You cut off three hundred dollars' wuth o' timber and sold it without sayin' a word to me. That's crim'nal. Law's mighty plain."

"You're crazy. Wasn't it my land an' my timber? Didn't I—"

"You don't own a stick of it till it's paid for. Look at the contract. You c'n farm it but you can't sell off the standin' timber without you turn the money over to me. Says so, plain as print. Took an' sold my propetty, that's what you did. It ain't your money you got in the bank—it's mine. I'm just protectin' my rights."

"You can't skin me, Sinnott! I'm not like these easy simps round here. I got two hundred an' thirty-six dollars comin' to me, an' I'm goin' to have it—now." Wyatt moved to the gate in the

railing, his arms flexed a little at the elbows, his shoulders low and forward. Without rising Sinnott reached into the drawer of his desk. His left hand clutched the tusk of his beard, its stroking motion arrested, and his right presented a steady gun.

"Don't try that on me, Wyatt. I've heard about you. You can scare some folks by doublin' your fists, but not me. Go an' hire a lawyer if you ain't satisfied. And while you're at it get a hundred and fifty dollars that's due on the place. This is the fifteenth. If you want to keep the farm bring me the money before three."

Jud Wyatt checked an impulse to risk the gun. Something told him that Sinnott would shoot, and shoot straight, if he opened the gate. His brain refused to believe what the banker told him. It was his timber; he had a right to sell it. They couldn't take his farm away from him on any such excuse—claim he couldn't meet his payments when there was more than enough in the bank to cover what was due. He turned and went out, blundering heavily into an entering customer, half blinded with the red mists that swam across his eyes. He found George Caxton in his musty law office over the hardware store and made the case clear to him.

"They've got you, Wyatt. Old Sinnott's about

the slickest land shark outside of jail. He's played this same racket before. You've got to pay him a hundred and fifty before three o'clock or he owns your land. And you'll have to make good the rest of the money you got for the stave bolts or he can levy on your stock and tools."

He had to repeat and explain before Jud Wyatt could realize what had happened. Then, when the hillman's anger flamed into speech, he calmed him patiently.

"Now what would killing old Sinnot get you? He's got some of your money, but there's plenty more money in the world, and you can get your share of it, same as you got what he's flimflammed out of you. But you go down there and kill him and what happens? Before you can go two miles they'll run you down—not one or two, but twenty of 'em. They'll stick you in the jail over at Millersville, and in about a year they'll sit you in the chair down at Auburn. Don't be a darned fool. He's got the best of you, that's all. Go out and get the best of him the same way. You got the same chance he had. The law's as fair for one as for the other."

Jud Wyatt stumbled down the scuffed pine stairs to the street, the words in his ears, mocking

him. As fair for one as the other! They'd made their tricky laws, these soft-handed fatland folks, to suit themselves. They hid behind them, cheating better men under their cover and forbidding better men to strike back with their naked hands. Go out and get the best of John Sinnott! How? Outwit a weasel, run down a fox, afoot! Man to man he could kill Sinnott with his ten fingers in as many seconds. But Sinnott stood safe behind the laws—the laws that allowed him to use a gun and forbade even fists to the men he robbed!

The extent of the disaster came slowly home to him. He had lost the farm, and Sinnott was the richer for all the work he had put into it. He would lose the additional land he had bought, too. Probably, under shelter of the law, Sinnott would seize his horse and cow and the few sticks of furniture. He had worked for these things—earned them in sweat and weariness—and Sinnott took them from him without lifting one of his fat, toad-skin hands!

As he passed the bank he stopped, tempted by the impulse to adjust the balance with his bare hands. But Caxton's warning held him back. He couldn't fight them all. Killing Sinnott would be killing himself.

A new thought came to him and a slow grin relaxed his lips. A fellow could climb up the spout of the Odd Fellows' Block and drop right down on the roof of the bank. Just a skylight to get past after that, and the door of the safe. Soup would be better, but dynamite would do. He had heard yeggs describe the process often enough to be sure that he could do it as well as they. And there was dynamite out on the farm, plenty of it, left over from his stump blasting. And a set of drills. Why, it would be easy! And safe, too. There was only one constable on duty at night, and his beat took him almost a mile from the bank. A fellow could easily time things so that he could get away clean.

He laughed as he thought of the money in the safe—money enough to buy ten years of a man's work. Go out and get the best of Sinnott, Caxton had advised. This was the surest way to do that—the way Sinnott didn't expect. These people, with their sly, tricky laws, had learned to be afraid of their own inventions—to believe that everybody was afraid, as they were. Sinnott relied on the law to keep other men's hands off his safe. There was the weak point, for Jud Wyatt to attack.

Suddenly he thought of Laura Bray and her

hunger for fun, for lights and laughter and the sight of cities. With money—he shut his lips narrowly. She would come with him. Show her money and she'd do it.

He went back to the farm at the best speed his horse could offer. With a glow of pleasure he drove a hurried bargain with a neighbour, selling him the stock and tools at a fool's figure, dominating the man's hesitancy with a level menacing eye. They were still afraid of him. They didn't know that John Sinnot had stripped him bare.

It was dusk when he stopped at the door of the Bray kitchen. Laura was busy with supper dishes and he helped her dry them, talking swiftly. He had come in for a lot of money—a lot of it—thousands. He was through with work. He'd given up the farm and sold off the stock. He talked easily of a future in big cities, watching her narrowly:

"I wish I was going too," she said suddenly.

"With me?" He flashed the question at her. She flushed, fingering the cloth in her hands.

"Want me to?"

"Yes. That's why I told you." He pressed the advantage. "We could drive over to the Junction and catch the limited. You could borrow a horse from your grandfather, I guess.

We'd be in New York by morning and we could git married there."

"I don't know." She twisted the cloth helplessly. "I want to, but I'm afraid. I——"

He overrode the doubt. "You be waiting for me at the stable—about one o'clock. I'll hitch up when I git there. Got to hurry now. Lot to do afore I start."

He left her staring after him, her face flushed, her eyes wide, a curious look of indecision in them, of helplessness. He grinned as he struck across the fields toward the village. No roads for him tonight. He mustn't be seen or they might suspect. If he worked it right they'd never be able to prove anything against him. The drills clinked in his pocket and he stopped to wad them with leaves. A step sounded as he finished. He looked up cautiously.

The sight of Andy's shrivelled figure reassured him. The old man stooped beside his basket, busy at some task which the thickening dusk obscured from Wyatt's eyes. And his high-pitched voice came clearly through the shadows:

"There now—didn't I tell you? You don't have to worry. Andy knows what's good for you—Andy and God."

Wyatt shook his head. The poor old bug! Talking to his everlasting weeds as if they were people! He craned his neck to see better. Andy lifted a thick spray from the basket, smoothed it gently and bent to the ground. Wyatt saw, this time. The old man thrust a dibble of sharpened wood into the soil, worked it about to enlarge the hole, and slipped the long root of a wild carrot into it, tamping the mould gently back into place.

"There—you're back where you belong now. It's better for you than down in the clover, even if you don't like it. Andy knows—Andy and God."

Wyatt checked a laugh. The old fool was replanting the weeds he toiled all day to pull! That explained his sprinkling them, that day by the creek! He glanced about him. Matthew Bray's woods! He hugged the joke on the farmer—paying for weeds which were replanted on his own ground before they wilted! He moved incautiously, and Andy heard him. The old fellow straightened quickly, peering toward the sound, his shoulders huddling as if he were frightened.

"It's only me, Andy." Wyatt yielded to an idle urge of compassion.

"Oh!" There was relief in the voice. "I

thought it might be Matt Bray. He wouldn't understand. Nobody does, except me. They can't hear God talkin' to 'em like Andy does. They just hate everything that grows except crops an' timber." He chuckled thinly. "They think I'm crazy. I've heard 'em say so!"

"No!" Wyatt feigned surprise, curiously tolerant, a rare good humour softening him as he saw the end of the game, the trumps and stakes in his hands.

"Yes-s. They don't know any better. But if they found out they'd be ugly. They hate weeds—specially wild carrot. Put it out in the road for the wheels to run over. Burn it on brush fires. They don't know about Andy. Andy plants 'em all back where they belong—early, before Matt Bray's awake, and late, when he's gone inside his house."

"Why, Andy?" Wyatt approached. He could see the lip and slope of the gully now, catch the queer, keen smell of wet leaves which lifted from the trickle of water below. All down the shifting slant of rotting shale he saw the lacelike stems and flat, ashen flowers of the carrot. He chuckled. Andy planted them exactly where they could spread their seeds over the flatlands most easily;

the brook would plant millions of them when it overflowed. The old man twitched his sleeve.

"You wouldn't tell Matt Bray, would you? He'd be angry."

"Not me. I'm goin' away tonight, anyway. Why do you plant this stuff up here?"

"Why, here's where it belongs. Don't you see? Carrot ain't meant to grow down in the fat lands, Jud. There's plenty o' things that can grow there—corn and potatoes and wheat. Ph! Crops!" His voice was edged with contempt. "Like to see corn grow down there in those rocks! Corn's got to be nursed an' petted like a sick baby, 'r it won't grow anywhere at all. But carrot—why, nothin' can hurt it! Carrot's my favour-ite."

He stroked a tall stem lovingly.

"It's mighty hard to kill," agreed Wyatt.

He ought to be moving, instead of standing here wasting time on this old lunatic's chatter. But the hand on his sleeve held him. He did not understand his submission, the heritage of hill-bred generations to whom the simple-minded were a link with God.

"Yes-s—when it grows in its own place," said Andy eagerly. "Nothin' hurts the carrot when it stays where God planted it." He lowered his

voice confidentially. "I'll tell you—you aren't like Matt Bray an' the rest. You understand."

"Sure. That's right, Andy."

Again his good nature puzzled Wyatt. It was getting dark fast, and he had three miles and more to cover twice, besides the time he would need inside the bank. And yet he was in no hurry to be gone.

"God hates bare places. That's the secret. He can't abide 'em. That's why he made the carrot, and the other flowers that can grow anywhere at all—to cover up the naked ground like a garden. You can understand. You go an' dig up a piece o' ground anywhere—grub out every grass root, and go 'way an' leave it. God just covers it up before you turn your back. Don't he? Eh?"

He twitched at Wyatt's sleeve again. Jud nodded. "That's so, Andy. Never thought of it like that."

"But God's too busy to make the carrot an' daisy an' burdock stay where he puts 'em. It ain't his fault. Anybody'd git keerless about his fences, havin' to look after everything, the way God does. You would yourself, Jud. So the carrot gits into the fat lands when God ain't

lookin'—the same as steers'll git into the corn when the fence ain't tight. Andy just drives 'em back, that's all."

Wyatt nodded, his slow fancy caught by the homely figure, the crude logic of the theory.

"Sort of tough on the carrot, though," he objected. "Maybe it likes the fat land better'n a place like that."

He waved his hand at the shale. "Maybe it wants an easy place to grow in, the same as corn."

Andy chuckled. "Oh, it does. But that's because it don't know what's best for it—any more'n a steer knows better'n to kill himself in the corn. But I'll tell you—it ain't good for the crops to have the carrot growin' in their ground, but it's worse for the carrot. Yes—s. You take a carrot that grows where it belongs an' it's a flower—ain't nothin' lovelier'n in big bank of 'em growin' in a gully. Down in the fields it gets to be a weed—just a big ugly weed, like Matt Bray says. So we put it back, Andy an' God. We know what's good for it."

Wyatt turned away grinning. The idea amused him, appealed to a hill-bred vein of fancy. He pondered it as he tramped across the woodland

toward the town, the weight of his drills and brace sagging his pockets. The poor old fool, herding his flocks of flowering weeds patiently back into the waste places—God's fences—the fat lands, where the soft crops grew. It was like one of the old tales of fairies he had heard his mother tell, in which trees and rocks and brooks were brought to life and speech like men and women. It ran through and through his thought as he approached the village along the far bank of the creek, screened against chance observance by the fringe of vines and willows. He crouched in a thick growth of weeds above the wrecked milldam on which he crossed, watching the lights in the windows by which he meant to time his enterprise.

The damp air intensified the night smells. Gradually the thin, faintly acid scent of the carrot, rising from the bruised stems under his weight, obscured his errand, brought his mind back to Andy's talk. A slow depression overcast his excitement in the adventure, a kind of grey shadow falling over a sunlit view.

Cities—he saw them again as he had known them, memory blotting out the fanciful pictures he had conceived since his sudden decision to break open John Sinnott's safe. He still foresaw

the lights and luxury, but, curiously, their appeal was dulled and flattened.

The fat lands, where the corn grew, and the carrot was no flower, but an ugly weed. . . . He tried to shake the silly idea from him. Laura . . . he summoned up a vision of her, the wistful vacillation in her eyes, the round, white, soft arms of her, the yellow hair framing her puzzled brows.

It bewildered him to discover that he did not thrill at the prospect of their flight together. He seemed to look beyond, into a future in which her arms would be a weight about his neck, her alluring softness an offence. He thought, with a stabbing indraft of his breath, that she would mother his children in the hot, crowded hurry of a city. They would be like her—dependent, clinging, drifting with the current of any stronger will they met, boys like Lonnie Carlin, girls like Laura herself . . .

The broken dam behind him made him think inconsequently of the days when it had leashed water for the mill, a skeleton of mortised oaken timbers, with a few rotting weatherboards still clinging to it. He had looked through the ruin on an earlier walk home from town, observed the massive strength of those timbers, the wooden shafts and pinions adzed and whittled out of

hickory and oak and ironwood. It had taken men to build that mill—men who could have stood toe to toe with Jud Wyatt, swung an ax beside him, equalled him at any test he chose.

Where were they now, those men? Their children must be alive—living here in the rich farmlands they had taken by main strength from the woods. Sinnot's Mills. . . . He thought of the Sinnot who had hewed those timbers out of the virgin woods, and of the Sinnot who sat behind a brass screen and trafficked in other men's money, with his plump sickly white fingers.

"It's bad for the crops when the carrot grows in the ploughland, but it's worse for the carrot!"

Weeds, like Sinnot, instead of flowers. Slowly, painfully, he achieved the parallel. There were men who were meant for the waste places that God abhorred, men who lived and grew hardy where lesser breeds would die. It was such men who had built the old mill, cleared the land. And their sons were Sinnot and Carlin and Charley Graney!

A stirring of wind seemed to lift the sharp smell of the carrot to his nostrils. He saw the overgrown garden in the hills, saw Hattie Flint, thigh deep amid the silver fronds, her eyes inscrutable, unconquerable, understanding.

He rose suddenly, a sobbing laugh in his throat. He knew that he would find her as he had left her, in the waste places where weeds were flowers, waiting for him to come back from the fat, soft lands where flowers were weeds.

He saw the lights of the eastbound train slipping toward the village, and broke into a run. In two days he could be back. . . .

THE HAMMER

I

A FRAMED placard in two aggressively cheerful shades of yellow arrested the resolute eye of Doctor Alexander Stark at the moment when his lips were stoically preparing to expel the word "finest." Suspended between windows on the outer surface of which a film of soot had already offended the Doctor's passionate cleanliness, it exhorted him, in the most imperative of moods, to "Build Binchester Bigger."

The expression with which the Doctor had thus far envisaged his task—a look amphitheatrically suggestive of hungry tigers and expectant vestal virgins—curdled to a scowl, a scowl which fitted itself to his features much as a shabby old shoe envelops the foot which has done sacrificial homage to appearances. It had that effect of conformity and usage which redeems an otherwise forbidding aspect. When he scowled Doctor Stark was not

exactly beautiful but one felt sure that his face was at ease.

"Read that again, please, Miss Alsopp."

The voice had changed, too, during that moment of silent inspection. It was no longer even attempting to be that voice-with-the-smile, which according to a notice pendant from the telephone transmitter, wins. Like the face, it was not inviting but yet oddly eloquent of comfort. A perceptible tension seemed to surrender its clutch on the atmosphere of the office. The girl at the desk slide relaxed a trifle, lifting a hand to a complex and aureate coiffing as she rehearsed the Doctor's laboured dictation in an unpunctuated, admirably neutral recitative:

"Mister 1 b hackett president atlas manfackching comppny oakland calfornia dear sir naccordance with your request frinfrmation concerning binches-
ter we take pleasure nenclosing our booklet entitled
big busy beautiful binchester nwhich you will
find a genral description fthe immense industrl
commercial nfinancial advantages vour city period
binchester is unquestionably the thats where you
stopped."

Her countenance and tone conveyed a cautiously delicate contempt for the inefficient device

of dictating, word by word, the form-paragraphs which could have been prescribed by their mere numbers. The twelve letters already completed by this process differed only in their addresses and an occasional specific application. But Miss Alsopp was clearly willing to feign a degree of complaisance toward the archaic foibles of her employer's father.

The scowl settled into the grooves and hollows of Doctor Stark's face. He nodded twice.

"We will scratch that out and begin again. H'm. Dear sir: In reply to your letter I am enclosing a—a pamphlet prepared by the local Board of Trade which contains much of the information you require. H'm. Binchester is a —a—"

He honestly intended to say that Binchester was a thriving city, but again his glance wavered just as he had whipped his impulses into line for the adjective. Beneath the sheet of plate glass which covered the top of the desk a card adjured him, in a brilliant green, "Don't knock—*boost!*!" Temptation seized compellingly upon him. He cleared his throat and straightened his lean shoulders.

"We will scratch that out and begin again,

Miss Alsopp." The girl's expression of noble patience overcame the last feeble remnant of his good resolutions. Fixing his gaze acidly on the hortatory maxim, he dictated, a lip-smacking relish savouring each word.

"DEAR SIR:

If you seriously consider locating any enterprise in Binchester you had better come and see it for yourself. It is a one-horse town, no better and probably not much worse than others of its size. It has two railroads, about equally unsatisfactory, and is also on the canal, which is closed to navigation for about six months of every twelve. You will find it possessed of the usual bad pavements, poor lights, execrable trolley-cars, and dishonest administration. It has a modern jail which is usually well tenanted, and its population, which numbers eighteen thousand, is very much like the population of other small communities. There are several factory sites in the market, owing to an ill-advised attempt to boom local business by persuading outside manufacturers to establish themselves here, with the usual result of attracting only visionaries or rascals, each of whom has left the town a little poorer but no wiser than he found it. There is also a supply of labour left over from these experiments, which is probably no better than such labour to be found

in other misguided cities engaged in lifting themselves by their bootstraps.

"If you visit Binchester we will take pleasure in showing you its disadvantages in more detail."

The Doctor drew in a deep, rasping breath, as a man breathes after a quenching drink. "That's all, Miss Alsopp."

The lady rose without haste. "Do you want me to write that last one?"

The Doctor surveyed her unpleasantly. Weeks of enforced acquaintance had impressed him with an accurate estimate of her mental vacuity. To discover that she had penetrated his design was irritating in exact ratio to his disapproval. He had yielded to the promptings of impulse only so far as to voice his actual sentiments, without intending to carry the indulgence farther than that. But Miss Alsopp's condescension challenged him.

"Write it? Certainly." He snapped the word at her. "Write it first, please, and I'll sign it before I go out."

She lifted high-visibility shoulders.

"Oh, *very* well."

Gesture and tone informed Doctor Stark that Miss Alsopp meant to be philosophic toward his

deliberate wastage of her time and labour. He was paying for it, her shoulders declared. He watched her, glowering, as she aloofly assembled letter-head, carbon, and follower, and manipulated the chattering keys. The result, faultlessly transcribed on an embossed sheet of crackling bond, was laid before him in the same detached, without-prejudice fashion. His eyes kindled morosely as the words yapped up at him. They looked even more alluring than they had sounded. He read the letter through with a sort of wistfulness, while Miss Alsopp stood at his elbow.

"Are you waiting for something?" He was aware of a deepening hostility toward her. It occurred to him that he would enjoy discharging her, if ever his daring could attain such an altitude. She smiled acidly.

"Yes. You said you'd sign it." Again the challenge spurred him beyond his first intent. He inscribed his name below the typewritten signature and blotted it impressively. That would show her! But her hand swam pinkly before him, expectant and satiric.

"Shall I mail it, Doctor Stark?"

For an instant he hesitated. But her tone was not to be borne. She was practically daring him

to despatch it. Of course he ought not to do it. It wasn't his office. He was only acting as locum tenens and stated supply for Calvin, and Calvin, assuredly, would have submitted to intricate martyrdom rather than permit that letter to escape. Of course it must be destroyed. . . . Doctor Stark's eye moved restlessly. It paused at the illuminated wall-map, wherein fat carmine lines radiated spokewise from the circular black blot that was Bigger Binchester.

"Yes—at once," said Doctor Stark. And his chest expanded agreeably as his revolt swept to its climax. He breathed strongly through distended nostrils while Miss Alsopp sealed and stamped the envelope and carried it to the mailing-chute in the corridor. Through the open door he distinctly saw her insert it, saw the white flutter as it sped downward behind the glass. For a moment the enormity of the thing appalled him. He thought of Calvin, and his brief glow of courage cooled. If Calvin ever found out. . . . He reflected swiftly. There would be no answer to that letter. Only the original inquiry and the carbon manifold, filed in the highly scientific tickler, could bear witness to his crime. Long before Calvin came back he could find opportunity to destroy the

evidence. He set his teeth and summoned an edged dignity to his voice.

"You may sign and mail the others when you have finished them," he said crisply. "If I am needed, you can reach me by telephone at the—" he stiffened visibly—"at the Anti-Fly Headquarters. I shall be there till one."

She stared. He detected in her eyes a tinge of the fascinated and reluctant admiration with which a dutiful schoolboy observes the jaunty bravo of the spitball. The look accompanied him pleasantly all the way to the temporary offices of the Binchester Swat-the-Fly Drive. He forgot it only as he stood before the inscription hung in the opacated show-window of the vacant store, loaned to the earnest swatters by his own connivance. Slowly, as his scowl adjusted itself still more affectionately to his countenance, his eye brightened.

He flung a quick glance over his shoulder, such a precaution as a respectable citizen would have taken, in the bad old days, before a swinging door.

Then, lifting his chin and squaring his shoulders, he strode in boldly, contemptuous of surveillance.

II

The fundamental difference between Doctor Stark and his son manifested itself very early in their acquaintance, the illuminating episode having to do with Calvin's firm attachment to one Micky Doolan, whose father operated one of those institutions described by the Doctor as *lager-beer-saloons*. According to Calvin's declarations Micky was superlatively prodigious in all things. Under cross-examination these excellences proved to lie chiefly in the way of pugilism, defiance of preceptorial discipline, and a joyous faculty of invention in the matter of after-school mischief. The Doctor's ban on the alliance put an end to Calvin's meal-time accounts of Micky's achievements, and he imagined that the embargo had been effective until his son astonished him, in the midst of a peculiarly absorbing campaign for no-license, by an outburst of reproach.

Calvin exhibited, on this occasion, a brightly decorated eye and an upper lip recognizable only by its context.

"It's all your fault," he informed his gravely inquisitive parent. "You went an' tried to put Micky's father an' mother in the poor-house an' o' course Micky——"

The doctor's disclaimers failed to convince. Calvin had indisputable evidence.

"You won't let me fight anybody," he accused, "but you're always fightin' somebody yourself. I don't see why you have to pick on Mr. Doolan, anyway. I like him—when I was friends with Micky his father'd always give us popcorn an' sausage from the free lunch——"

The Doctor's horror at this familiarity with evil did not divert his son from the main issue. He listened morosely to a lecture on the sinfulness of free lunches and returned to the attack.

"I don't care. If you'd leave Micky's father alone Micky'd be friends with me. S'pose his father was always fightin' you? Wouldn't you want me to lick Micky if I could? It's all your fault."

The incident was prophetic. As Calvin grew, a freckled, exuberant boy, incorrigibly addicted to friendliness untempered by discrimination, the breach steadily widened and deepened. The Doctor occupied, during the ten years which fol-

lowed his successful attack on Timothy Doolan's prosperity, four different pulpits in as many towns, in each of which Calvin made friends as industriously as his father lost them. And the original grievance became more definite between them.

"You're always stirring up fusses," Calvin accused, as they prepared for an exodus from Millersville after a vigorous but foredoomed assault upon its seven rum-shops. "The minute we get settled anywhere you go and start something. Why don't you ever boost, instead of always knocking? Why don't you build a new church or—"

He heard a pungent discourse on the reasons why starting something, knocking and boosting should be described in authorized forms of speech. Doctor Stark harboured a passion for undefiled English which was almost as strong as his crusading instinct. The original topic was dropped.

A new environment waited at the end of this emigration. The Doctor had accepted the chair of Greek and Latin at Mariposa University, and Calvin forgot his grievance in the spectacle of football, hazing, sign-pilfering and other manifestations of the higher culture on tap at Mariposa. He

made himself swiftly popular among the students, in spite of the impassable gulf between a professor's prep-school son and the least magnificent of freshmen. Inevitably he espoused Mariposa's athletic causes with all his might.

Inevitably the Reverend Alexander flung himself straight into the perennial faculty dispute concerning football, and triumphantly generalled the forces of discontent. Calvin, facing matriculation at a college shorn more shamefully than Samson, and already foretasting his heritage of undergraduate disesteem, rose to open revolt. He was seventeen, and his friend-making proclivities had given him a sophistication and aplomb beyond his years.

"I'm through," he declared. "This lets me out. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life scrapping with people just because you don't happen to agree with them. Not that I mind fighting—if it's *for* something. I'm just sick of this everlasting anvil solo of yours. It doesn't get you anything, either. You've knocked yourself out of five jobs in ten years, and you're all set to repeat with this one. We'd better split. You won't miss me. I only hamper you in these rows."

Doctor Stark contested the issue perfunctorily,

out of a sense of duty. He was aware that he ought to be appalled at the prospect of separation from his only son, and tried to reproach himself for the relief with which he contemplated the division. Calvin's addiction to riotous superlatives, his incurable enslavement to the vice of slang, his bent for befriending the very people inevitably in opposition to his father's causes, were more trying than the Doctor had quite admitted to himself. There had been moments, of late, when he had surprised himself in the act of disliking Calvin. He made unwise allusion to the parable of the prodigal, in his farewell address. Calvin chuckled.

"Thanks, father. When I'm down to corn-shucks I'll let you know. And when you get hold of a fat calf, wire me, and I'll come back and help you butcher it. But if you were a betting man I'd offer odds that the first invitation to dinner will have reverse English on it."

"It will, if you write it," said the Doctor, to whom the phrase had but one meaning. "I don't see where you pick up such abominable colloquialisms, Calvin——"

"I just meant that I'd be the one to cook the veal and you'd be cast for the home-bound prodigal," said Calvin. "You wait and see."

He departed cheerfully, to bring up at Binchester, where he found a position within three hours of his arrival, and whence he wrote with an enthusiasm which expressed itself in processions of abused adjectives. Doctor Stark answered these communications dutifully, returning the originals with the marginal corrections. He was engrossed, as the new college year began, in a plan for the elimination of class rivalries in general and hazing in particular, and he did not realize the steady increase in the intervals between Calvin's panegyrics. Sometimes, indeed, he overlooked answering them. Calvin was manifestly doing well, and there were nearer matters to occupy the Doctor's attention. Hazing died hard, and interest in Xenophon and Livy was surprisingly dormant among the students.

He saw his son once or twice a year, and observed that he prospered, that his mental attitude continued to be as offensively buoyant as ever and that his speech bristled with new and deplorable distortions. But separation tended to revive something like affection between them. Doctor Stark thought of Calvin, now, without a pained and puzzled regret for his shortcomings, and Calvin, when he wrote or when they met, was plainly

disposed toward a bluff and slightly protective friendliness. On several of these occasions he referred humorously to fatted calves and as each summer drew on it became his habit to send the Doctor an earnest invitation to spend it with him in Binchester, where he now occupied a small bachelor apartment. These signs of attachment pleased Doctor Stark. He was beginning to discover a kind of solitude which his activities seemed unable to lighten, a desire for something warmer and more personal than the fellowship of a common cause. He enjoyed the thought that Calvin liked him enough to want his society. But he refused the invitations in order to devote his summer leisure to the unpaid service of an organization dedicated to the devastation of the vineyard and the rye-field, and aided its endeavors with a lively relish and some visible success.

At twenty-four, Calvin was in business for himself as a real-estate dealer, was already becoming a personage in Binchester, and had conceived and fathered the Bigger Binchester movement. To an indomitable optimism he added a certain canny thrift which prevented him from reinvesting all his profits as he made them. But he lived and breathed for the single purpose of magnifying the

city of his adoption and chanting its glories in particoloured inks and display type. He styled himself, with frank pride, as the best little booster that ever came down the pike to the liveliest, finest little city on the map.

It was at this stage in his son's career that Doctor Stark embarked on a Russian campaign, with the fraternity system of Mariposa as its Moscow. When the dust of that battle lifted, the chair of Greek and Latin was temporarily vacant and its late incumbent, at fifty-six, contemplated a financial crisis considerably more ominous than any of those through which his red star had led him. A stiffnecked pride forbade his appealing to Calvin until he had spent what was left of his small savings in an attempt to find another position. He arrived at Binchester so much after the fashion of the gentleman who did not enjoy husks that Calvin had the grace to make no allusions whatever to the parable.

He welcomed his father warmly, insisted on providing him with clothes and pocket-money, rented a larger apartment so that the Doctor could have room for his battered library, and declared, with a bluff intolerance of contradiction, that he would do all the supporting the Stark

family might hereafter require. Nor did he once take on his lips that most ungracious of all speeches which reminds the listener of a prophecy which time has justified.

At first Doctor Stark informed himself that he had misjudged Calvin from the beginning, that his son, if deplorably unorthodox in certain respects, was essentially sound in the vital things. It was only after some weeks of their new fellowship that he began to harbour an unworthy suspicion of a secondary motive behind his welcome. It occurred to him that his arrival at Binchester increased the population by one, and Calvin's conversation inclined him strongly to the belief that some measure of his cordiality was due to this circumstance. Binchester's best little booster yearned vehemently to behold her populace multiply, in his own phrase, by leaps and bounds. Doctor Stark felt that his coming was regarded as one of these saltations.

His pleasure in Calvin's breezy affection waned as he listened to table talk dealing principally with the greatness and glory of Binchester present and future, and the manifest destinies of the Binchester Realty Co., Cal. Stark, Pres. and Gen. Mgr., Industrial Properties a Specialty. Watch

Our Smoke. At first these tokens of Calvin's prosperity pleased him, but repetition gave them at length the aspect of a taunt and challenge.

"Watch your smoke?" He lipped the words medicinally. "That is not difficult. I have trouble in *not* watching it. I never saw more soot and grime——"

"You said a paragraph!" Calvin beamed. "In a couple more years we'll have Pittsburgh looking like Spotless Town. I tell you, father, this old burg is shooting up like a weed——"

"Precisely." The Doctor compressed his lips.

Calvin plainly interpreted this assent as complimentary. He nodded happily.

"That's the proper spirit! You're catching on fast. Before you've lived here a year you'll be as strong for the town as I am. There's no place like good old Binchester——"

"I've seen none," said the Doctor discreetly.

"You bet you haven't." Calvin performed a diagonal nod. "I've been thinking about putting up a business proposition to you, father. I can see you're getting this Binchester bug as bad as I have, and it struck me you might like to help push the burg along. How about coming in with me at the office and learning my game? You wouldn't

have to put in any more time than you wanted to, and it'd give you something to do. I'm not urging you, of course, but——”

Doctor Stark thought hard and fast. He perceived that Calvin was paying him a high compliment. He was also aware of a wistfulness in his son's voice. Calvin wanted him. The idea was warming. And there was also the indisputable fact that at present he was a pensioner, a dependent on Calvin's generosity. He contrived to look pleased. Calvin pumped his hand.

“That's bully! I was afraid you mightn't care for it. With both of us down there we'll just about pick up this old town and teach her how to buzz like a bee! You'll see!”

Which altered the existing situation by condemning Doctor Stark to listen for some twelve hours daily to that which had begun to oppress him when heard only at breakfast and dinner. He managed to confine his own labours to the clerical part of Calvin's business, and consoled a steadily intensifying discontent by the assurance that he really earned his share of the profits. Independence reacted on his flattened pride. His individuality clamoured again for expression. Calvin found him, after a month's experience, frowning

happily over a rough draft of a smoke-prohibiting ordinance. He restrained his speech with a visible effort, and excluded Miss Alsopp from his audience by shutting the inner door before delivering himself.

"I've been hoping I'd cured you of that gloom habit," he said, choosing his words with manifest discretion. "I thought that it wasn't going to be necessary to have a—a show-down. But I guess we'd better have it out right now and understand each other. I want you to stay here with me permanently. That's flat. I've missed you ever since we split up, and I've been happy as a kid with a Christmas stocking ever since you came. You know that, don't you?"

There was no mistaking his sincerity and Doctor Stark warmed under it, even though the tone reminded him of his own parental declarations of regard at times when the rod was about to be unspared. He nodded, a trifle guiltily.

"Good. Then you'll understand that what I've got to say isn't—isn't any sign that I'm sore at you or tired of your company. But this is my town and my business and my life. And whatever you do and say here is bound to affect me just as what I did and said when I was living with you

affected you, only more so, because I was just a kid and you're grown up. You realize that, don't you?"

"Yes, of course. But——"

"Wait. Let me finish. I'm a booster, first and last and in between. Everything I've got goes into building up—never into tearing down. And I'm winning out on that system. You can see that. You—I hate to say it, but it's true—you're a knocker, father. Your instinct is to grab a hammer and smash something before breakfast. All your life you've been waking up in the morning and saying to yourself: 'Well, what shall I slam today?' You've got the habit. It's second-nature with you to hit at something you don't like——"

"Suppose it is? What's the difference between smashing something bad and building something good? I——"

"There's all the difference on earth. Just suppose you could absolutely destroy everything that doesn't look perfect to you? You'd have a world full of wreckage and ruins, and nobody'd be a hair better off till some builder got busy and cleared up after you.

"There's a block of old tenements down on Canal Street that aren't fit for kennels. Your

idea would be to get a wrecking-crew on the job tomorrow. It wouldn't occur to you that the three or four hundred people who live there now would have to sleep in alleys till they found room somewhere else. That's the knocker's system. My way would be to get hold of some vacant land near by and build a block of decent buildings and rent 'em to those same people for about the same money. I wouldn't care a rap whether the old ruins came down or stood empty. That's a fair illustration of the difference. Get it?"

"I think so." Doctor Stark's reason was convinced but his instincts stood out for more than interpretive reservations.

"Everything bad is meshed into something good," said Calvin. "Society's just one big machine. It has some imperfect cogs, but you won't make the machine run better by smashing the flawed wheels. About the smoke, don't you see that it's our best advertisement? It means that Binchester is busy, that lots of factories are making money here——"

"They'd make more if they stoked properly——"

"Perhaps. Then the answer is to show 'em that fact—sell 'em smoke-consumers and mechanical stokers. That's constructive. This scheme

of yours is just negative. Suppose you managed to have that ordinance passed? You'd have the fight of your life to get it half enforced, and you'd advertise Binchester as a place where a manufacturer could expect to get it in the neck. You wouldn't do anybody any good. See?"

Again the Doctor was constrained to agree without the consent of his nethermost convictions.

"Then that's understood. I just wanted to make you see why I can't stand for a knocker in my office. I should think you'd realize that it never pays. You've been swinging your hammer all your life and you'd be down and out now if you hadn't happened to draw a booster for a son. You've only been helping me build up this town for a few weeks and yet you're making good at it. Doesn't that prove I'm right? I tell you, father, the whole world hates a crape-hanger—and the world's right, at that."

The anti-smoke ordinance went into the Doctor's bottom drawer. The Reverend Alexander, doing lip-service to a new gospel of bass drums and brass bands, underwent the distressing experiences of the unfeudged teetotaller, to whom all the universe seems only one vast opportunity and temptation to revert. Never before had he seen so many

abuses which cried to high heaven for his battle-ax and mace.

Binchester, nominally dry, was impenitently humid to the saturation point. Its government extended to other ills the same amicable tolerance discernible in its attitude toward the lurking Demon Rum. On the swampy island in the muddy stream which fed the canal roller-coasters clacked and ballyhoo experts brayed throughout the battered Sabbath. Every cigar-store and billiard-hall flaunted an impudent lottery device of perforated cardboard and red pasters. The public preference in the drama, if the bill-boards were to be believed, was eagerly anatomical.

And, gagged and handbound by Calvin's ultimatum, the Doctor moved amid these exasperations, mute and unprotestant, assenting by silences to paeans of Binchester's praises, expressed in words which tore shrewdly at the purist's soul of him.

There were subtle aggravations, too. Binchester was no unwarned Gomorrah. Many a voice lifted audibly in its wilderness, and the Doctor suffered the refined tortures of hearing earnest but inadequate Jeremiahs mangle the causes which his battle-tried skill could have led to easy tri-

umph. Worse: he was compelled to refuse proposals which every instinct ached to accept, to shake his head mutely when the Anti-Noise Society would have made him Chairman, to mumble disingenuous evasions to a committee from the Law and Order League, withholding even the assurance of his sympathy.

Only one sprung from a line of stubborn covenanting martyrs could have endured his trials. Even Alexander Stark came, more than once, to the brink of apostasy.

His resolution had worn thin when Calvin, after a Boom Barbecue on the island, at which river-water diluted the grape-juice, developed a violent case of typhoid. The Doctor's concerned affections silenced the mutterings of his rebellious impulses. Calvin, waiting transfer to the hospital, clearly found solace in the thought that his business was to be left in competent and loyal hands.

"It's lucky you're here to keep things going," he said faintly. "I'll feel perfectly safe about the office, with you running it. Never mind any new business. Just keep it going. And—you remember what I said about—about——"

"About—er—destructive criticism? Yes. Don't

worry Calvin. I'll manage perfectly. You can depend on me."

He endeavoured to surpass the letter of his promise. He not only saw to the semi-automatic routine of his work and Calvin's, but, shutting his lean lips and fastening his gaze on the framed maxims surrounding Calvin's desk, he strove to practice what they preached. He drew much inspiration from Calvin's sheaf of form-letters, prepared by a high-priced specialist who styled himself Live-Wire Larson, the Letter Wizard. Plodding like a flagellant over strewn thorns, the Doctor marched through these buoyant compositions, deliberately culling the expressions which hurt him most, and mouthing them for Miss Alsopp's nonchalant pencil with a distinctness which rubbed salt into every laceration of his spirit.

He appeared as Calvin's alternate at the weekly luncheon of the Bigger Binchester Club. He sat through committee meetings which demanded the stoicism of a Seneca brave; he submerged himself utterly in the surcharged atmosphere of optimism which was Calvin's natural ambient.

He overdid it. In three weeks he arrived at a condition of mind in which the trivial provocation of the yellow placard precipitated the reaction.

He dictated one letter precisely as the spirit moved him. He went out and offered his services to the Swat-the-Fly Movement. And, reporting to Calvin, feebly convalescent, he shamelessly suppressed the truth concerning both of these misdemeanours.

III

IN his normal element the Reverend Doctor Stark was formidable. Stimulated by the accumulated bitterness of his mute, inglorious months, he drove a swath of desolation through Binchester's flydom which would have discouraged a more rational organism or destroyed a race less industrious in the science of multiplication. He laid about him with a cold fury chilled and sharpened by every recent outrage upon his inclinations. There was a merciless efficiency in his measures which made for almost as much discomfort on the part of his fellow-swatters as for their quarry.

Within twenty-four hours of his enlistment he was in full charge of operations on all fronts. A tame and faltering policy had been replaced by a scientific frightfulness which must have stirred even a Prussian to envious regret. He shook together an organization of those who could be driven as hard as he drove himself, and drove them with the insistent ferocity of a dynamo. He got results.

An empty war-chest was swiftly replenished by a levy on the Doctor's boom-bent business allies, who good-naturedly submitted to extortion on the part of one established in their regard as himself a booster. The newspapers, accustomed to be subservient to Calvin's clamorous publicity, were easily browbeaten into free advertising, written with the Doctor's fine frigidity of restraint. The bill-boards flamed with his declaration of war, and his call to arms carried far into schools and churches. There was a colossal thermometer in painted wood nailed to the façade of the Second National, upon which a mounting crimson column recorded the casualties in units of a million.

The Reverend Alexander was too happy to devote much attention to a minority report from his conscience which reminded him that his present endeavours must be classed as purely destructive criticism, and complained that he was wilfully neglecting the office in favour of his militaristic dissipations. The majority report approved his course. Even Calvin could certainly find no defence for the house-fly. There was actually sound medical evidence to support, against that friendless insect, a *prima facie* charge of complicity in Calvin's typhoid. Doctor Stark shut

his teeth firmly and ordered another great gross of patent swatters.

He soothed Calvin's anxieties with recitations of business progress which, if accurate in the letter, were in spirit intentionally deceptive. Calvin was still too weak to be permitted newspapers and his father was the only visitor allowed to see him, so that the truth was easily withheld. It troubled the Doctor slightly to confront his negative falsehoods, but his unleashed lust of slaughter made light of weakling regrets.

For eight gorgeous days he was sanguinarily happy. Then he became aware of a fly in the ointment—a fly which declined to be swatted.

He found no words to fit the discontent which settled on him even as his forces swept gloriously on from hecatomb to holocaust. Calvin's polluted vocabulary would have voiced it easily. The Doctor was merely realizing that he was a piker.

There was no joy in this massacre, however epic its dimensions. The Reverend Alexander was a fighter. He missed the clash of answering steel, the lifted war-cry of foes who came to strike back shrewdly, not to be butchered in pacifistic non-resistance. Remembering his embattled past, he

viewed his present engagement with a mounting shame. He, once a rampant terror to gun-toting bootlegger and furtive gambler, sunk at last to slapping house-flies with a square of woven wire!

In this mood he stopped at the hospital, where half an hour of the laboured optimism which was Calvin's drug brought him to a crisis. He made his escape without catastrophe, but Doctor Meade, Calvin's physician, encountering him on the steps, cast oil on the inner flames.

"Great fight you're putting up against the fly nuisance," he said, as they moved together toward the sidewalk. "Pity it's all wasted——"

The word bit through Doctor Stark's lowering inattention. "Wasted?" he echoed, on a rising inflection. "Wasted?"

Meade interested him suddenly, a medical man utterly unlike the professionally sunny gentlemen of the Reverend Alexander's experience, a dour, lank, person dejected of eye and lip and shoulder, whose face had been known to lighten when prescribing quinine.

"Swatting flies is good exercise for the children," conceded Meade. "Outside of that you might as well stand on the courthouse steps and read 'em a proclamation. Do as much good. Long as you

keep on incubating 'em you've got as much chance of exterminating 'em as you'd have of dipping the canal dry with a teaspoon."

"Explain that, please." Doctor Stark barked the request in his old-time voice. Here, perhaps, was a man to be quarrelled with.

"Horses," said Meade. "Stables. Four hundred of 'em inside the city limits. You see—" he plunged into science. The Reverend Alexander listened raptly, his scowl hugging every fold and hollow of his face.

"Suppose we abolished the stables?" he interjected in a breathing-space. Meade shook his head.

"Have to bar horses from the outside, too. Farmers—driving in to market. Couldn't be done. Not in this century, anyway. Maybe in a couple of hundred years—"

"What's to prevent it's being done right now?" Doctor Stark's eye glittered like a dancing rapier-point.

"People that own horses would fight, that's all. You couldn't possibly—"

"Couldn't I?" The Reverend Alexander inhaled profoundly, his nostrils expanded like those of an eager racer at the barrier. "Couldn't I?"

He groped darkly for a phrase worthy of the task before him. Calvin's ardent letter-head came before his mental vision. He scowled joyously.

"You watch my smoke!" he said.

IV

DOCTOR STARK wagged his head with emphasis and his expression of acidulated content deepened to a positive beatitude of bitterness.

"No, sir. This is not an effort to benefit anything or anybody. It is a campaign of unadulterated destruction, and its single object is to exile the horse from Binchester forever. We are grinding no man's axes——"

"But Doctor——" Mr. Joe McWhorter, Binchester agent for Titan Trucks, wore the aggrieved look of him whose magnanimity is shamefully misconstrued—"you're going to need all the help you can get to put this thing across——"

"In the year eighteen ninety-seven I might have taken that view," said the Doctor. "I was then engaged in a campaign to close the gin-mills of the village of Meeker's Junction, in Iowa, and I accepted—gladly, I regret to say—a contribution of one hundred dollars from the manufacturers of a widely-advertised non-alcoholic beverage known

as Koko-Soko. I will not dwell on the painful consequences, except to say that twenty-eight votes were cast for prohibition and three hundred and forty-six against it. I learned then not to cripple my causes by anything remotely suggesting self-interest. I shall ask you to go out through the rear door, sir. And if you truly desire to advance this movement you will condemn it as loudly and vigorously as you can."

He plunged into his interrupted labours. McWhorter sat quite still for perhaps ten seconds. Then, with a curiously respectful countenance, he departed. He walked carefully on his toes. And he took exceeding pains to make his exit into the alley at the back of the temporary offices unseen of all men.

Doctor Stark snorted at the memory of the episode. But in the main his spirits were depressed.

True, matters were shaping better than his first conception of his task had ventured to hope. He had discovered a situation radically different from the armed and vigilant opposition experience had taught him to expect. The foes he had fought in his militant past had learned to anticipate attack and had acquired, in self-defence, some elements

of strategy and tactics. The horse-owners of Binchester were taken utterly unawares by the sudden ferocity of his onslaught. They had no organization and no leader. They were unprepared with rebuttals. The first shower of blows stunned them into an apathy of abused bewilderment.

Doctor Stark had withheld his fire shrewdly until he stood ready to pour it hotly and from every quarter. He enlisted his allies before he suspended diplomatic relations. He mobilized in swift secrecy and saw well to his supply of ammunition.

The Binchester Medical Association provided him with authoritative evidence of equine complicity in the nefarious multiplication of the fly, and established the guilt of the insect himself beyond any possibility of refutation. The Board of Health furnished a typhoid map of the city, with its four hundred and twelve stables blazoned in red, each surrounded by a cluster of yellow dots indicating recorded cases of the disease. From the same source came confirmatory statistics dealing with lesser ills. The Anti-Noise Committee flung itself whole-heartedly into the fray, with the declaration that shod hoofs and steel tires were responsible for no less than eighty-six and twelve

one-hundredths per cent. of the unnecessary tumult of the streets. A studious young gentleman employed as permanent secretary by the Taxpayers' Union delightedly supplied a diagram revealing the fact that horse-drawn traffic carried less than one per cent. of Binchester's freight and passengers, but required approximately twelve per cent. of its street capacity. He also evolved a companion document exposing the truth that the horse, responsible for practically the entire cost of street-cleaning, paid, directly and indirectly, for less than a tenth of one per cent. of that outlay.

To his compact nucleus of disciplined and drilled fly-swatters, Doctor Stark added one powerful element after another. The horse, under his manipulation, suddenly stood forth as the immediate and inviting target for every one of the diversified groups of Binchesterians for whom Calvin's supreme contempt was crowded into his anathematic phrase: The Anvil Chorus.

For the first time in Binchester's brief history, that term assumed a descriptive accuracy. Never before had these independent and earnest movements remotely approached the harmonic unanimity which is the first requisite of a choral performance. Their several blows had rung in dis-

cord. Now, under Doctor Stark's compelling baton, they struck in time and tune, and the thunder of their music shook Binchester to its bedrock.

A novice in the science of destructive criticism might have been deceived by these achievements. The Reverend Alexander had seen too many paper conquests go their disappointed ways to be misled into false confidence. He knew accurately where he stood.

Binchester, in token of its progressive bent, was governed by a highly-modern commission of eight, with the Mayor, separately elected, as a ninth and *ex-officio* participant in its counsels. Three of these commissioners represented the voters of Binchester. Six, including the Mayor, held their seats by grace of one Martin Devery, whose title and powers had mysteriously survived the reform charter which was guaranteed by its sponsors to wipe out all bosses forever.

Doctor Stark was perfectly aware that the three tribunes of the public would vote affirmatively on his ordinance and that the other six would placidly relegate it to the table, unless his popular clamour could be strengthened by something more effective.

This situation would have caused the Reverend Alexander small concern, had it not been compli-

cated by the thought of Calvin, whose progress toward recovery, during the early stages of the fight, had been alarmingly rapid. Once Calvin escaped from his room at the hospital, the Doctor knew, the Anti-Horse Movement would suffer instant and abject collapse. He must force the fighting to a decision within the week.

Doctor Stark confronted his problem with a deepening conviction of failure. There was no visible way of crowding Martin Devery into line except by the pressure of public opinion, and this slow-moving influence could not possibly be brought properly to bear in the brief interval left him. Calvin might be allowed the newspapers at any minute, now.

He pondered, his mind still distracted by the memory of his interview with Mr. McWhorter. He was queerly possessed by a reluctant belief that the visitor might have helped, in some unperceived fashion. The idea grew upon him until he yielded to it far enough to call McWhorter on the telephone.

"Did you have anything in mind, particularly, when you offered me your co-operation?" he demanded when McWhorter's voice came confidentially to ear.

"Why, I thought we might chip in toward expenses, of course——"

"No. I meant something less obvious. We have money enough——"

"Then you've got a lot, all right. Devery'll never let your ordinance pass for any small change—not with all those teams of his——"

The Doctor caught his breath. "Do I understand you to say that Mr. Devery—Mr. Martin Devery is himself the owner of——?"

"Only fifty-six—and a nice fat contract with the city for hauling ashes to the dump! That's why——"

"That's all!" The Doctor cut in quickly. "You've told me enough. Good-bye."

He breathed deeply and drew a sheet of blank paper toward his pen. Deliberately, weighing each word, he wrote a few short paragraphs. He read them over, nodding sourly as a phrase, here and there, impressed him as touched with a pleasing hyperacidity. The telephone interrupted him in the act of departure. He listened impatiently to Miss Alsopp's statement that Mr. Ralston had called to see him and would return at eleven. His scowl bit firmly into its wonted fissures. The affairs of the Binchester Realty Company annoyed

him, in these days, by intruding thoughtlessly on matters of infinitely greater import.

"I shall endeavour to meet him there," he said. As he reached the street he sighed again, contemplating the eternal difficulty of simultaneous service to Mammon and Righteousness.

Martin Devery, discovered in the office of his contracting establishment, displayed that want of personal animosity with which, on the part of his enemies, Doctor Stark was dejectedly familiar. His joy of combat desired foes who gnashed their teeth at him in private as well as in print, and he had often departed regretfully from trying interviews with publicans and other sinners who persistently declined to bear a decent malice. He found it hard to hate evil properly when tempted to like the evil-doer.

He saw at once that he must face this temptation again. Binchester's boss distinctly appealed to his sympathies—a small, thin, quiet man with a sober, intelligent face and a diction as impeccable as the Doctor's own. They exchanged greetings, measuring each other cannily. Doctor Stark came straight to his point.

"I felt it only just to warn you that I have decided to centre my attack on you, personally,

Mr. Devery, and to give you an opportunity to avoid the consequences, if you so elect."

Devery nodded. "That is generous," he conceded. "You have impressed me all along as a man who fights hard because he prefers to fight fairly. But I am rather accustomed to being attacked, personally and otherwise, and——"

"I beg your pardon. You are not accustomed to being attacked by me." Doctor Stark spoke sharply. "You have dealt only with so-called reformers of the enthusiastic type, estimable people, no doubt, but weakened by their effervescence. Invariably they scatter their fire instead of centering it. They waste their energies in hurrahs. I do not. Possibly this preliminary announcement will enlighten you. I am planning to insert it in tomorrow's papers."

Devery adjusted eye-glasses and read aloud: "There is one reason and only one for the failure of the Commission to adopt the Ordinance ridding Binchester of the twin nuisances of horse and house-fly. His name is Martin Devery. Because he owns fifty-six teams and holds a city contract enabling him to extract four profits from their use, he will order the following six men to vote against the ordinance, and they will obey him,

because they are more afraid of him than of you voters and citizens."

He skipped the names and read on:

"If you are tired of tolerating this pestilent partnership of horse, house-fly, and Devery, you can end it at the next election. You know how."

Doctor Stark cut in once more. "That is no more than a crude draft, but it may suffice to demonstrate wherein I differ from the usual reformer. You will observe that I confine myself to one point—your private interest in this question. I am not for anybody. I am only against Martin Devery——"

"I see." Devery removed his glasses and polished them carefully. "It is an effective plan. I am willing to admit that you may beat me with it. Mass-psychology is an interesting study, isn't it? People who could not conceivably unite for any common purpose of construction will join delightedly to pull something down. Yes. You can make trouble for me, if you print that advertisement and follow it up vigorously."

He paused, and his glance consulted the Doctor's unrelenting glare. Something in his expression told the Reverend Alexander that he had read his man correctly. One great advantage of choos-

ing wicked men for one's opponents, he had discovered, lies in their universal preference for compromise. An upright foe, however misguided, cannot be bought, but the sinful have no troublesome scruples against the silver bribe. The Doctor waited patiently, sure of his man at last.

"It seems to me that this is essentially a case for concessions on both sides," said Devery, at length. "Admitting all your contentions as to the presence of horses in the city, the fact remains that this ordinance of yours will work considerable and undeserved hardship on many people who have not committed the unpardonable sin of bidding successfully for a public contract. There's Danny Cleaver, for instance. He's just bought out Tim Geehan's livery business. It took Danny eight years to save that money, and he's married on the strength of his future profits, too. Now——"

He studied Doctor Stark's face for a moment.

"It has occurred to me that you horse-haters are possibly right about this question. I have been considering the use of trucks, in my own business, for some time. But Danny Cleaver and a few hundred others more or less like him aren't so fortunately situated as I am. Suppose, for a moment, that you would consent to an amendment provid-

ing for a sub-committee empowered to appraise damage caused by your ordinance to legitimate private interests, and to reimburse out of the general fund——”

He drummed softly on the table, watching the implacable scowl adapt itself a shade more nicely to Doctor Stark’s features.

“The Abolitionists precipitated the Civil War,” he said gently.

“They won it.” Doctor Stark welcomed the omen.

“Yes. But I’ve wondered, sometimes, whether it wouldn’t have cost them less, in the end, to have displayed a reasonable regard for other men’s lawful property-rights. This amendment, for instance——”

“I’ll draw it myself,” said Doctor Stark abruptly. “Here. Now. You’re quite right.”

Twenty minutes later he shook hands, unashamed, with the pestilent co-partner of the house-fly and the horse. At eleven he was at his desk in the realty company’s office, already beginning to experience the sensations of his prodigious namesake. Binchester might still present new worlds to conquer, but this Alexander’s career was ended. In a mere tale of hours Calvin would re-

duce him to a mean lieutenancy in the detestable service of the brazen gods of Boom and Boost. He would sell real estate for his bread and butter. He achieved a frown of almost majestic gloom, as he submitted to the intrusion of Peter B. Ralston, to whom, for two years, Calvin had been vainly offering the disused factory of a late and sorely lamented rotary engine company.

"Thought I'd go over that engine plant again," he announced. "Been thinking I might be able to use it, after all."

Doctor Stark rose without enthusiasm. "I'll go out with you," he said, in the tone of one who makes a grudged concession. "But you don't want it. You would have to remodel the entire floor-plan—"

"I know all about that." Ralston was a gentleman of easy irritability, impatient of contradiction. "I guess I'm able to see a hole in a grindstone."

They drove out in the livery car for which Calvin contracted on a monthly basis, and, knee-deep in forlorn weeds, surveyed the shell of the ill-starred rotary motor.

"I knew you wouldn't want it," declared Doctor Stark. "Look at that roof!"

"What's the matter with it?" Ralston's red-

wattled jaw protruded. "A few new tiles and a little ground glass'll make her as good as new. Let's go inside."

"You'd have to knock out those walls," said the Doctor, presently. "And the roof-support scheme is all wrong, too."

"I saw that the first time I looked at the place," said Ralston. He shook his head impatiently. "You needn't be afraid of putting anything over on me. It can't be done. I know my way around."

He inspected the melancholy relic with a particularity which the Doctor found hard to support, and which drove him, again and again, to invite attention to disadvantages the existence of which he had discovered from Peter B. Ralston's pessimistic conversation during an earlier visit under Calvin's ciceronage. Ralston turned on him suddenly.

"Look here, Doctor, I know what I'm doing. I've got a verbal refusal till the first of the month, and I don't care whether or not you've had a better offer. You can't talk me out of buying this plant, if I decide it's what I want."

The Doctor's startled protestations of innocence fell, visibly, on unfriendly ground. They drove back in silent hostility. The Reverend Alexander

was conscious of a lively relief when they separated. Even a counterfeit salesmanship, in his present mood, was beyond his powers. He was surprised but not greatly cheered by Ralston's abrupt decision to buy the plant, announced defiantly as he stepped out of the car. Eight hundred dollars in commissions meant nothing to the Reverend Alexander Stark, facing a future dedicated to the business of building Binchester bigger.

Even the news that the Commission, sitting in special session, had unanimously adopted the Anti-Horse Ordinance, failed to uplift him. Calvin was almost well. He reproached himself for permitting the assurance to take on an aspect of melancholy.

V

"A ONE-HORSE town!"

Calvin's voice was ominously lowered. He gave the words the effect of blasphemies, echoed awfully as the preamble to indictment. Doctor Stark, quailing under his son's terrible gaze, remembered his crime too late. In the lust of battle that heinous letter had been left forgotten in the files. He caught a glimpse, past Calvin's shoulder, of a consciously virtuous expression transfiguring Miss Alsopp's countenance. Mechanically he identified her as the avenging goddess from the machine.

"Did you dictate this—this letter?"

"I—I'm afraid I did, Calvin——"

Calvin's fist thumped the yellow manifold. "If any other man on earth had said you could do a thing like that I'd have hit him on the nose," he declared. "My own father—going out of his way to smash my business while I was on my back—going out of his way to knock the town I'm breaking my neck to build—when I trusted you——"

The Doctor shook his head. "It was an unpardonable thing, from your point of view. I don't try to defend it. And yet, if you could understand the underlying causes——"

"Understand!" Again the accusing thump. "It's plain as print! You just can't help slamming something! You've got to knock or die——"

Ralston interrupted him. The final formalities in the sale of the engine-works were of paramount importance, even in this moment of red tragedy. Calvin pulled himself together with an effort. Papers were signed and a check changed hands.

"You've got a wonderful bargain, Mr. Ralston," said Calvin. "At the price, that plant is the best invest——"

"Forget it, Cal. You'll have me backing out of it yet, if you keep on with that line of talk." Ralston grinned at his confession of weakness. "You'd have sold me that plant a year ago if you hadn't rubbed me the wrong way with your everlasting praises of it. I wanted it, but I just couldn't stand the way you went after me." He nodded sidewise at Doctor Stark. "Your father had my number, all right. Never came near me, after you got sick. Waited till I got ready to come in here and ask him to take me out there."

He chuckled. "On to my curves, weren't you, Doctor? Telling me how the roof leaked and the partitions would have to come out and the plumbing was all wrong! You spotted me right off for an overdose of Cal's boost medicine, didn't you?"

He shook hands with them both, clapped the Doctor soundly on his angular shoulder, and puffed away, deed in hand. The Doctor whirled to his self-defence.

"That was what ailed me, Calvin, when I wrote that letter—just an overdose of—of that sort of thing." He directed his index finger at the yellow placard. "I know I shouldn't have yielded to an impulse like that, but it—it simply wouldn't be denied. I—I meant to destroy the carbon before you came back. I'm sorry you stumbled on it—"

"Stumbled on it!" Calvin choked on the words. "Stumbled is good! Read that!"

He thrust a telegram toward the culprit. With a sense of catastrophe, Doctor Stark absorbed its laconic message. L. B. Hackett would call on the Binchester Realty Company early on Wednesday the twelfth. The calendar confirmed his stabbing realization that this *was* Wednesday the twelfth! He let the yellow slip flutter back to

the desk. A thin, malicious inner voice admonished him: Be sure your sins will find you out! The degenerating effect of imminent disaster corrupted his mental process to a miserable play on the words. His sins were finding him *in*, an insane, giggling fancy informed him. He winced. Across the desk Calvin refilled his lungs. The Doctor bent his head to the impending blast. But Miss Alsopp intervened.

"Mister Hackett," she heralded, with a flick of her yellow eyes at the Reverend Alexander, who interpreted it in her own idiom and knew that he was about to get "his." His what? He wondered numbly, as the caller came in with the effect of a gust of boisterous wind, a vast, vital figure, boomerangly cordial.

"Who wrote me that letter?" He glanced from one to the other. "I've been waiting almost a month to meet the fellow that—"

"I wrote it." The Doctor spoke almost meekly. He felt that he owed all possible exoneration to Calvin. "My son was ill at the time and I was trying to—"

"Shake hands, Mister Stark. It's worth the trip east just to know you." He rumbled with subterranean mirth. "I bet I know that letter by

heart. Got it framed and going to keep it hanging over my desk in the new plant. A one-horse town! Show me its disadvantages in more detail! Say!"

Again he reverberated inwardly. His tone struck curiously on the Reverend Alexander's bruised consciousness. After all, he reflected, Hackett was here. And with Calvin to exhibit Binchester—

"I wrote to about fifty towns we'd been considering," said Hackett. "And I've been trying to kick myself properly ever since. I drew the finest little collection of hot-air and hurray-boys' bull-con ever assembled under one roof. I got so I was afraid to peek in the glass for fear I'd seem as simple to myself as I figured I must look to the come-on artists that boiled into town on my trail. If it hadn't been for that letter of yours—" He wagged his head. "Say, if you ever helped thresh on a fine hot summer prairie till your throat was an inch deep with dust and you'd just about made up your mind that it wasn't worth while to keep on trying to breathe, and then a belt slipped and you got a chance to sink your teeth in a nice, extra-sour, juicy lemon—get me? That letter was enough to make me swear I'd build our plant

in Binchester if it broke the firm. Shake hands again. I got a car waiting outside and we'll go and have a look at some of your darned disadvantages in detail!"

Doctor Stark ventured a cautiously oblique glance at his son. Calvin's throat was moving feebly, and his eyes were wide and blank. He was clearly unequal to the situation. The Doctor stepped manfully into the breach.

"Of course I wrote in a—er—playful spirit," he began, not altogether ingenuously. "Binchester has many excellent features——"

"You needn't waste 'em on me," said L. B. Hackett, lifting a monstrous palm. "It's got one that I know about. The rest don't matter. When I read that story in the Pittland paper, yesterday, I just about bubbled up and boiled over. A one-horse town, you said. But it's a horseless town, now—the first and only horseless town on earth! Why, just that line in our advertising is going to sell every truck we can turn out for the next ten years! Think of it—Atlas Trucks, Built in Horseless Town! I'm going to come and run this plant myself, just to live in a community that's fifty years ahead of the rest of the world."

He breathed deeply. "As soon as we've got a

site selected I want to find the man that put that idea over," he continued. "The account I saw didn't mention any names, but a big job like that is always a one-man job——"

"My—my father did it," said Calvin, in quite a new voice. "It—it was all his idea, and he put it across single-handed——"

Something like reverence smoothed the face of L. B. Hackett. He shook hands for the third time, humbly.

"I might have guessed it," he said. "The man who wrote that letter—what I wanted to see you about was this. I'm on the Board of Directors of the American Truck Association, and it struck me that maybe we could persuade you to make this Horseless Town idea a national movement. Speaking unofficially I think I could offer you——"

A cry of anguished protest from Calvin anticipated his father's refusal.

"Not for a minute!" He shook his head energetically. "Binchester's got first call on my father—Binchester and the business." He avoided the Doctor's eye and proceeded doggedly. "We—we're just reorganizing the firm under a new style—Alexander Stark, Incorporated—" he slid into a meditation manifestly concerned with

sign-boards and letter-heads, groping aloud for subsidiary phrases. "The Father of Horseless Town—a good, snappy red—no—I've got it! Just: Aleck Stark—The Man Who Put Binchester on the Map!"

Doctor Stark sighed faintly. They also boost, he thought, who only stand and knock. His glance, moving restlessly about the office as he felt the trap closing upon him, came to rest on the window, grey with its overlay of soot. Slowly his scowl cuddled into the corrugations of his face and his astral fingers tightened on a handle—Thor's mighty weapon, debased, now, to a mere builder's tool, but still—happily—a hammer!

THE LAZY DUCKLING

I

FOR the length of time he required to detach and swallow a segment of the grape-fruit on his plate, Gilbert Blaik was remotely and pleasurable aware that he held the centre of the stage. The sensation of importance was sufficiently novel to possess a certain gentle charm. He enjoyed it, as he enjoyed or suffered all emotions, with a placidly passive submission.

His older brothers, Arthur and Jim, already well entered on the eggs-and-bacon stage of breakfast, regarded him with alert eyes in which a startled incredulity contended visibly with envy. His father's glance, which commonly avoided Gilbert, or contemplated him with a repressed disapproval, had risen from the memorandum-slip beside his coffee-cup, and exhibited interest, if not actually a trace of respect. Even Gilbert's step-mother, whose mental processes were normally unable to

take cognizance of her husband's youngest son, spared him an instant of attention. As for Ethel, her face wore the blank, injured look of a stunned pugilist about to receive the finishing blow.

It ministered mildly to Gilbert's content to realize that all of this had been accomplished at the price of no greater effort than the utterance of five short words. Even to make Ethel aware of his existence was an achievement. Her fixed policy was to ignore him. Arthur and Jim were "my two big brothers," but Gilbert, when accident required Ethel to account for him, was, reluctantly, "my mother's step-son," in a tone which besought the listener to press inquiry no farther and commanded Gilbert to retreat to his place in the closet with the lesser skeletons afflicting the family of Blaik.

Ethel found her voice first. Usually it was a carefully played musical instrument, but in moments of excitement it was prone to discordant stresses with which Gilbert was resignedly familiar.

"*You know her? You know Agatha Winston—well?*" Ethel forgot to be heavily ironic, in her first, numb amazement at the effrontery of Gilbert's claim, but remembered herself before his deliberate habit had formulated a repetition. "I

suppose you see her at the Rumleighs' or the Carews'—or the Hunt Club? I sup——"

Gilbert shook his head. "Bank," he said. "Deposits there. See her every day, about."

He was instantly conscious of the half-resentful collapse of interest which follows the discovery that a seeming miracle has a tamely natural origin. It occurred to him that he might have prolonged his sensation by holding his tongue, but he felt small regret. They'd only have bothered him. Easier to tell and be done with it. He returned to his grape-fruit, wholly reconciled to his restored insignificance. As a rule he preferred not to attract attention. People noticed him, he had observed, only as a prelude to unpleasant comment or still less agreeable command. The incident was closed, for him. It was Ethel who reopened it. Her sudden explosion into words shattered the silence which Gilbert had again begun to enjoy.

"I knew it! I just knew it was something like that! It explains everything. No wonder Agatha Winston treats me like—like a climber! My brother's an—an office-boy in her bank! No wonder they don't want to know us—they think we're all just—just office-boys——"

"Rot," said Gilbert, surprisingly. He had dis-

covered that abstention from speech is infinitely more effective as a turner-away of wrath than the softest of soft answers. He had no impulse to dispute Ethel's reference to his own shortcomings, but he felt, vaguely, that her attitude reflected on Miss Winston. "Friendly's can be."

"Oh, yes!" The menace of tears hung in Ethel's lifted voice. "She'd be *apt* to be friendly with a common clerk in a one-horse bank, wouldn't she? Friendly!"

"Is." Gilbert discovered an unsuspected capacity for sticking to his point. Argument, usually, offended his basic principles, but concerning Agatha Winston he found himself possessed of a puzzling positivity of conviction. "Nice, jolly girl. Like her lots."

Ethel achieved an expression of elaborate respect. "How nice of you, Gilbert! Not a bit stuck-up, are you? And she likes you, too, of course—"

"Does." Gilbert nodded. "Good friends."

George Blaik intervened. "That'll do, Gilbert." His glance softened as it moved to Ethel, decorative even in her exasperation. She appealed to him.

"Papa! Can't you make them keep Gilbert out

of sight, at the bank? It wouldn't be so sickening if he didn't stand there, where everybody sees him, like a clerk in a grocery——”

“Bookkeeper,” defended Gilbert. “No disgrace——”

His father eyed him ominously. “Think not, eh? Think it's all right to stick in the mud for seven years? Ethel's right. I'm ashamed of you, myself—ashamed to have a son so bone-lazy he'd rather be a clerk all his life than try to get on——”

“Stop, pretty soon. Saved some. Quit when I get enough.”

This defence precipitated a ten-minute address of which Gilbert was at once the audience, the text, and the Horrible Example. It swept up to a climax.

“I'm ashamed of myself, by Judas! I've made it too easy for you to be lazy! I've let you live here on the fat of the land, getting just as much as Art and Jim——”

“Pay board,” objected Gilbert.

“Ten a week! It wouldn't cover your breakfasts, anywhere else, and you have the impudence to call it paying board! We're going to have a show-down, right now. You won't work till you

have to. All right, you'll have to, then. I'll give you six months to work yourself into a decent job. After that, if you're still stuck on your book-keeping job you can get out and *live* like a book-keeper. Maybe a hall room and a cabbage diet'll put some spunk into your system. But I don't believe it. You're too lazy to get up if you sit on a tack. By Judas, you're a disgrace to Satan—they say he finds mischief for idle hands, but he's never found any for yours! A fine thing for a man like me to have a son like you! Six months, mind. After that——”

He left the sentence suspended. His staccato steps sounded a diminuendo in the hall, whither Jim and Art followed, exchanging sympathetic grins. Gilbert returned tranquilly to his breakfast. Ethel lingered, her enmity a trifle damped by the impending exile, her incredulity tempered by persisting recollections of Gilbert's invariable truthfulness—a veracity, the family tradition alleged, which rooted in his antipathy toward the mental effort required for plausible invention. She lowered her voice.

“Honestly, Gilbert—do you really know her—does she treat you as if you belonged to the same tribe, I mean?”

"Uhm—hm." Gilbert pursued a fugitive bit of bacon.

"Do you mean you'd—you'd dare to go and *see* her?"

"Uhm—hm." He paused and qualified.
"Would if it wasn't so much trouble."

Ethel embarked upon a scornful giggle, thought better of it and considered. She leaned across the table.

"I dare you, Gilbert. I just dare you!"

"Dare ahead," said Gilbert, rising regretfully. But Ethel had succeeded in precipitating an idea which had hung in suspended solution. He contemplated it at leisure as he rode downtown.

II

GILBERT BLAIK could not remember a time when his attention had not been affronted by the detestable and mysterious phenomenon of work. From the beginning he was at once displeased and bewildered by the fevered, scurrying labour engaging the family to which, by what is frequently less accurately described as the accident of birth, he had happened.

A vivid recollection of his mother served as the foundation for his slow-forming hostility toward industry. A tall, gaunt woman, generally turbaned with a towel, she had led a wistful, observant Gilbert an endless chase over wet, glistening floors, redolent of aggressive soap, through minor hurricanes of dust rising from a dampened broom or billowing out of carpets ravished from their anchorage and hung across the clothesline in the yard. He stood back, cannily out of the channel, to behold the plush-upholstered chairs and lounge wheeled out to be beaten with rods on the front porch and wheeled back with a distressing smell

of kerosene about them. He quickly learned that mothers were not meant for playmates and presently discovered that a boy who hung about within reach of eye or ear invited an involuntary participation in the matter of steaming laundry tubs and clattering masses of china and tinware in the kitchen sink. He gradually forgot an instinctive desire to be near her, and hid among the burdocks and rusting cans of the vacant lot, avoiding the society of other youth obsessed with strange manias for plays involving speed or effort or the bodily discomfort of rude contacts.

He learned to cower down behind the weeds instead of answering a shrill, petulant wail of "Gi—i—il—*berri*," aware that punishment for failure to remain within call might easily be overlooked during the scurry of meal-times, and that even when administered it was preferable to prying rusty tacks from carpets or extracting dust from the intricate convolutions of black-walnut furniture. Once he overheard a neighbour-woman tell another that his mother was working herself to death. The phrase lodged, and troubled him. It seemed curious that people should enjoy anything at once so uncomfortable and so sinister in its possible consequences.

Watching more shrewdly he distinguished between inevitable labours and those which were seemingly affairs of choice. He could understand the necessity of cooking and bed-making, but the daily rite of blacking the kitchen stove, or the weekly porch-parade of chairs, or the recurrent carpet-beating, impressed him as wholly voluntary indulgences in a stupid and revolting vice.

He was seven when his mother fulfilled the ominous prophecy. He was puzzled at the change in her, motionless and peaceful in the dimness of the parlour. He had never seen her in repose, and something tightened in his throat as the ashen face appealed to some vague, groping thirst for beauty. A deeper detestation of the thing to which he charged the loss of her rooted in him. You died of work, just as you might die of scarlet fever or diphtheria.

He conceived a fear of it, which blended easily with his puzzled hatred. He avoided it more carefully than ever, and the relaxed discipline which followed Aunt Minnie into the house afforded him a better opportunity for evasions. Aunt Minnie wasn't a good housekeeper, by Gilbert's exigent standards. She was contented with a monthly cleansing of the plush parlour, and the

rear windows often went unwashed for even longer intervals. She didn't object, either, to cooking on a stove which had burned to a rusty red, nor to window-curtains faintly grey with a film of city soot. But she was sufficiently industrious to forfeit Gilbert's incipient respect, and, he discovered, unpleasantly able to remember derelictions in the matter of appointed tasks.

His horizon broadened to include his father and the two older sons. Their addiction to the mystifying vice of labour was less uncomfortable and obtrusive, but he came to understand that it was equally intense. He gathered an understanding of George Blaik's activities as a vendor of insurance, from supper-table talk, and a reverence for his father dwindled into a bemused and pitiful contempt. "Called on that prospect forty-eight times before I landed him," seemed more like a confession than a boast, to Gilbert. "Well, Minnie, I saw twenty-six prospects today and sold two of 'em." Gilbert regarded George Blaik with a tolerant compassion, as he listened to such admissions. The compassion gave way to scorn when he correlated descriptions of the day's labour with complacent references to money in the bank and six per cent. mortgages on other men's houses,

and realized that no pressure of necessity drove his father into these excesses.

He was even more contemptuous of the unmanly condescension to lessons. George Blaik spent his evenings submerged in paper-bound books and printed question-papers based upon them. He had three sections of glass-fronted casing filled with previously conquered "courses," and his single extravagance lay in the purchase of book after book bearing on his business, or on business in general. The redeeming feature of this passion was that Blaik was too engrossed to pay much heed to his youngest son. He was absently affectionate toward Gilbert, and sometimes presented him with nickels or even dimes for which no equivalent in labour had been forthcoming.

Arthur and Jim commented enviously on this bounty. "That kid's got it soft. Any time we got a cent out of papa we worked for it."

This was true enough. They continued to work for their private funds. Arthur owned a flourishing newspaper route and a savings-bank pass-book. Jim devoted his leisure from school to selling patented specialties at kitchen doors—a display of hereditary talent which delighted his father. Gilbert felt no envy for their prosperity.

They didn't even spend the money for which they exchanged the infinitely preferable possession of leisure. His own windfalls ministered to his desires, but nothing in the glass counters of the candy-store or the show-windows of toy-shops even tempted him to attain it at the price of work.

A step-mother, replacing Aunt Minnie when Gilbert was twelve, made no appreciable difference in his attitude, although she brought with her a daughter a few months older than Gilbert and introduced the innovation of a hired girl and laundress. In her way she worked even harder than his own mother had done. She slaved desperately in the service of the church and of other organizations, for most of which she seemed to act as secretary. She infused a new atmosphere of work—a sort of mental pressure which Gilbert could feel, dimly, and which he resented even more than he had hated the damp, miserable bustle of house-cleanings. The new Mrs. Blaik treated him kindly enough, but he sensed that she was aware of him only half-consciously, and he kept out of her way for fear of errands, an occupation for which she appeared to believe all male humanity had been created.

His step-sister, Ethel, would have interested

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him if she had not made it apparent, from the beginning, that she disapproved of him as much as she admired Arthur and Jim. Ethel, at twelve, had a shrewd eye for the difference between successes and failures. And she had the bald frankness of childhood in stating her opinions. She forbade Gilbert to claim kinship, at school.

"You're not my brother. You're no relation at all. I wouldn't have such a lazy, stupid thing in my family."

Gilbert accepted this philosophically, although he observed that Ethel was fond of talking about her two big brothers and their prowess. Arthur and Jim liked her outspoken approval and were gentle and thoughtful toward her. It was through her that the word *lazy* fastened itself permanently on Gilbert. Arthur and Jim adopted it readily, and even Mrs. Blaik, sorely tried over undelivered messages, made frequent use of it. Gilbert, in secret, regarded it as complimentary. If you weren't *lazy* you liked work. He was glad that he escaped that folly. As between being *lazy* and *crazy*, he felt that the advantage lay heavily with him. But he did not argue the matter. He was indolently thrifty even in words.

Echoes of the family verdict reached his father

and led to hurried rebukes and warnings, heard in silence which George Blaik construed as agreement. He was too busy to spare much thought for the detail of a son. He had an office, now, and employed several men, besides continuing to solicit in person. A sudden outpouring of business literature bade fair to overwhelm his evenings. The advertising pages of his favourite periodicals were spattered with insidiously seductive descriptions of correspondence courses in business-management, in the command of English, in the construction of persuasive letters, in the art of salesmanship. The sectional bookcases multiplied and filled. Arthur and Jim took naturally to this type of literary indulgence, and Gilbert, under compulsion, plodded sorrowfully through a welter of words, the essence of which affronted and appalled him with a gospel of work for work's sake. He passed a hasty oral examination without disaster, and kept his opinions to himself. His father dismissed him, on several occasions, with a declaration of his belief that no son of his could possibly contain a lazy bone. Gilbert himself wondered mildly whence his rational view of life could have emanated.

A forcible-feeding system of instruction ac-

counted for his passage through the High School. Enough of the tiresome matters discussed in class-rooms soaked into his memory to save him at examination time. He graduated at seventeen, already a man in inches, overtopping his father and brothers, who were alike in their compact, aggressive bodily construction. Gilbert was lank and loose-jointed. He walked with a deliberate, shambling stride utterly unlike Blaik's brisk, staccato gait. He stooped a little, and his pockets sagged from the constant weight of his hands.

Graduation precipitated a climax he had vaguely foreseen. His father interviewed him in the upper room which had been refitted as a family study, against a background of golden-oak desk and book-shelf, framed mottoes appreciably after Franklin, and photographs of insurance divinities living and deceased.

Gilbert surveyed his father with a mild, impersonal interest, as a misguided but well-intentioned inferior. It was impossible to look at George Blaik without thinking of work. He radiated energy and industry. His keen, aggressive face, with the abrupt white mustache, suggested the portraits of successful business-men which Gilbert had seen as frontispieces in his father's pet periodi-

cal—a fat, advertisement-ridden magazine shamelessly labelled "*Business*."

"Well, Gilbert, you'll be wanting a job. I suppose?"

Gilbert shook his head. His father hesitated.

"You don't care for insurance?"

Gilbert repeated his negative wag. He liked conversations which called for no complicated answers on his part.

"Well, I doubt whether you'd make good at it, anyway. It's the greatest business in the world, for the right man, but it takes more hustle and hump than most. And with Arthur and Jim besides the others I don't need anybody at the office just now. What's your idea?"

Gilbert lifted his shoulders three quarters of an inch.

"Oh, come! You must have some preference. What would you like to do?"

"Nothing." Gilbert stated the fact calmly. He never lied. Lying involved an initial effort plus a subsequent and complicated job of remembering. It was easier to tell the truth.

For a moment or two his father seemed not to have heard. His blunt, restless fingers drummed lightly on his desk. He studied the photograph

of Lucius G. Hitchcock, as if merely to contemplate the dynamic image of the author of "Business First" might lend him wisdom and patience for what confronted him. He spoke quietly, at last.

"You mean that you don't want to work at all? That it?"

"Yes," said Gilbert.

Another silence. Then: "Let me get this straight. You don't want to work. What do you want to do, then?"

"Nothing," said Gilbert.

"Do you mean to sit there and tell me to my face that you'd like to spend your life sitting still—doing nothing——?" Blaik's reddish face assumed a deeper tone of ruddiness, and his white mustache seemed to lift and bristle. His voice rose a little.

"Yes," said Gilbert.

"Am I crazy or are you?" George Blaik exploded in a passion which was almost plaintive.

"You." Gilbert felt the need of elaboration. "Looks crazy to me. You said you could quit any minute. Told mamma so last night. Why don't you, then? What's the sense——?"

He stopped, disturbed at the expression with

which his father regarded him. There was a long silence.

"I get you, now, I think. Your idea is that if I can retire, but don't want to, you can relieve me of it by retiring before you begin. You'd like to sit in the sun and think, or perhaps just sit, while Art and Jim and I rustle a living for you."

The heavy irony was wasted on Gilbert. Words had one meaning. If you intended them to mean something else, that was your affair.

"Yes." He was again constrained to enlarge. "You like work. You do it because you want to. I hate it. All right. You can have my share. I don't want it."

"Thanks." Blaik was calm again, except for the drumming of his fingers. "I see your point. You're generous about it. There isn't any reason why you should work, then?"

"No," Gilbert was relieved at being understood.

His father laughed. "That's the trouble. I see. You don't believe in working without a pretty good reason."

"No."

"Then I'll furnish one—the best one on earth. You're going to work, after this, because if you

don't you won't eat, or wear clothes or sleep under a roof. Beginning next week you'll give mamma six dollars every Saturday night or stay out of the house. Pretty good reason, eh?"

Gilbert lifted his eyebrows. "You can make me work," he conceded. "I don't see why you want me to—I don't try to keep you from working, but you want to keep me from resting. Funny."

"Yes. It's funny, in a way." Blaik nodded. "But I mean it, Gilbert. I guess it's partly my fault. I ought to have found this out before, instead of sweating my soul out to make money for you. But it's never too late to begin over again. You're lazy. I never believed a son of mine could be, but I was wrong. Bone lazy and not ashamed of it. I can't make you like work, but I can make you *do* it. And I will."

"All right. I'll work." Gilbert nodded "Didn't ask me if I would. Asked me if I wanted to. Your office?"

"Hardly. It takes a man who eats work to keep his head above water in the insurance business. You wouldn't fit in, there. I'll get you a job somewhere else. I hate to wish you off on any friend of mine, but I'll do it. Let's see. You don't like any kind of work, at all, do you?"

"No."

"But you probably hate some kinds worse than others. And it would be a good idea to put you where your preferences aren't outraged any more than they have to be. So if you can think of anything that will hurt your feelings less than——"

"Bank," said Gilbert. He had already meditated on this point. George Blaik brightened pathetically. He had the ingrained respect of the small, independent business man for the wielders of money power. It was plain that the idea of his son as one of these appealed instantly to his imagination.

"I don't know but that's just about what you're cut out for, after all. It's a good business, too. And Mason, over at the Central, would give you a chance, if I asked him. I'll see him in the morning." The restraint faded out of his voice, and a friendlier, almost respectful quality replaced it. "You've thought it out, have you? You've got a good reason for choosing a bank——?"

"Yes." Gilbert was disarmed by the altered tone. He became confidential. "Hours."

A moment later he slid through a half-opened door, wafted from the presence by the sweep of a terrible arm. He clung, during the evening and

the following day, to a cheering hope that his father's speechless anger might react to his advantage. George Blaik ignored his existence at breakfast. But after supper he spoke abruptly.

"You're due at the Central Bank at eight tomorrow. Mr. Mason's got a good job for you. Know what they call it?"

"What?" Gilbert was not hopeful. His father emitted a barking laugh.

"You're going to be a runner," he said. And Gilbert heard him laugh again as the study door slammed.

Gilbert, presently reassured as to the complete absence of running from the duties of a bank-runner, accepted the situation with some philosophy, although the accompanying discovery of a natural error in respect to the hours of banking labour was disconcerting. He did as he was told, and, profiting perhaps by the sympathetic attitude of the other messengers, attracted no unfavourable notice. He made no effort to acquaint himself with the inner mysteries of his profession, but some inkling of the processes in which he was reluctantly concerned was forcibly thrust upon him.

The Central did not belong to the clearing house. It stood in the centre of the retail shopping district

and for the most part its depositors were women, who found its service adequate and who approved warmly of its whereabouts. Their cheques, however, were very rarely payable to other depositors in the Central. The retail stores carried their balances in the big commercial banks farther downtown; the telephone company, the purveyors of gas and electricity and coal and ice followed the same policy, and the husbands and fathers whose signatures validated the cheques which wives and daughters deposited in the Central were nearly always of similar mind. As Gilbert became aware of the fact that his labours, like those of other runners for other banks, were necessitated by this condition, he thought, wistfully, of a millennium in which every cheque presented at the receiving-teller's window should be drawn against a balance in the big, loose-leaf ledgers of the bookkeeping department. He was less concerned with outgoing funds, because these put no extra burden on his shoulders. But if there were no cheques to be presented at the Miners and Merchants, or the Conewango National, or the City Trust, or the Maritime, he mused, it would be unnecessary for Gilbert Blaik to slide along the oak bench toward the end whence the next curt summons

would exile him to the streets with a crammed wallet of cheques and drafts.

He spoke of this dream, incautiously, to one of the bookkeepers, and the ribald mirth which greeted it alarmed him. He heard the word *lazy* often enough at home. It would be discreet to keep his indolent ambitions to himself, here at the bank. And he realized, moreover, the force of the bookkeeper's pungent declaration that if the Central had no need for messengers there would be no oak bench and no Gilbert to occupy it.

His wistfulness transferred itself to the lot of the bookkeeping staff, attracted by their ability to sit down continuously at their tasks. He was charmed, too, by the machines which all but relieved them of effort, electrically driven adders, demanding only finger-touches. . . . He made no direct effort to attain this relative Nirvana, but possibly the mere intensity of his hunger for it reacted on his superiors. Possibly a desire to please George Blaik, whose account was, in these days, decidedly worth keeping, had something to do with his promotion. Gilbert did not trouble himself over causes. It was enough that he could sit, that he no longer was obliged to tramp

from one bank to another, with only wretched intervals of motionless repose on the oak bench.

He picked up the new work readily enough, and did it acceptably. Considering the other men, set in authority above him, he found no reason to envy them. The tellers, objects of the unthinking ambition of other underlings, were on their feet from nine till three. Their wage and prestige made no appeal whatever to Gilbert, and the discovery that the path toward a cashiership led through a novitiate in a teller's cage effectively ended any remote idea of attaining such an estate. He did not like his work, to be sure. He detested it cordially. But it was the least of many evils confronting him, and as such to be treated with caution and respect.

His twenty-fifth year found him still devoted to the S-to-Z accounts, with an income of ninety dollars a month, to which, at Christmas, a like sum was added as a bonus. He was not contented, of course, but his discontent still gazed covetously backward. He did not want more pay, because more pay inevitably involved a "better" job, a job in which, by doing more work, he could possess himself of higher wages for which he felt no need. The most active dislike for his work cen-

tred on the occasions when he was detailed to the bookkeeper's window, to answer feminine questions concerning balances and to hand out cancelled vouchers and balanced pass-books. Here, just as if he had been made a teller, he was obliged to stand up.

Meanwhile, at home, his position had been regularized. His father, after experimenting with persuasion, bribery, intimidation, and sarcasm, had gradually resigned himself to the disgrace and reproach of a bone-lazy son, and adopted an attitude of unawareness, which had more or less established that of the others. Gilbert's habit of silence made it easy to ignore him, at breakfast and dinner—it was dinner, now—and except on these occasions Gilbert was not often in evidence. He preferred his bedroom, small and scantily furnished as it was, to the big, aggressively decorated living-room, where the gospel of work was oppressively perceptible in even the silences, and where he was made uncomfortably conscious of disapproval. He spent his evenings in pyjamas, reading literature of a type which placed no strain on his mind, or staring at the ceiling and waiting for the soft intoxication of sleep to descend upon him.

The new house would have pleased him, by virtue of its multiplied comforts and conveniences, had it not been pervaded by an atmosphere of activity even less avoidable than that which had permeated the ramshackle old place on Whitney Street. He liked the setting, in a half-acre of lawn, with a clump of old trees sweeping a long slant of shadow before the porch when he came home in the afternoon, and a wide, silent boulevard in front, instead of the narrow clatter of Whitney Street, where the trolleys clashed past all night and the cobbles lent an impressive clamour to every passing grocer's cart. But once inside the effect of repose was gone.

His step-mother had a typewriter, now, and occasionally even a temporary stenographer to operate it. The telephone stuttered almost continuously and Gilbert encountered hurrying, lean women in the hall, their angular shoulders erect under a self-assumed burden of other people's business. George Blaik had a dictating machine in a corner of the library, and the book-shelves affronted Gilbert's instincts whenever he passed them. Bewildering compilations of insurance statistics sat fatly beside resounding treatises on *The Power of the Will* or *Ten Secrets of Success*.

or *The Fine Art of Salesmanship*. The old correspondence courses were here, too, with ever-multiplying new ones. And here, after dinner, or through long Sunday afternoons, George and Arthur and Jim talked about business and money and work. Gilbert heard a new word with wearisome frequency. Efficiency—it seemed to be another divinity, from the way they named it. And yet even Arthur and Jim had money enough to stop when they pleased and never even think again of work! As for George Blaik, Gilbert's banking information enabled him to keep accurate track of the swift increase in his wealth. The sure knowledge that his father was a rich man only increased Gilbert's scorn of his helpless addiction to the vice of work.

Ethel was busy, too, in a fashion of her own, and Gilbert, avoiding her cannily, acquired a deeper pity for her delusion than for those of the others. She toiled tirelessly at the job of "getting to know" people who, like Agatha Winston, seemed disinclined to any reciprocal endeavour. Ethel's obsession drove her as relentlessly as George Blaik was ridden by his passion for work and money. Her days were spent in a parallel and equally irrational pursuit of something which

Gilbert considered utterly unworth possessing. Unlike his father, however, Ethel failed of attainment. Gilbert sensed this rather than reasoned it. All planes of society were placidly alike to him, and the acquaintances Ethel succeeded in making seemed as desirable as those who continued to elude her.

His one distinction between human beings arose from his work at the bank. He had a private system of classification by which people were assorted according to the number and character of their deposits and withdrawals. He entertained something like affection for an ancient lady who made one deposit of an even thousand dollars on the first banking day of each month, and withdrew it, in even multiples, twice or thrice a year. He cordially detested Mrs. Andrew B. Selleck, who deposited small cheques for uneven sums, two or three times a week, and whose cheques fluttered toward Gilbert's desk like a flurry of unwelcome snow. Except for this difference all men and women were equal in Gilbert's sight, and Ethel's delusion of social distinctions between them provided him with a languid amusement.

His attitude toward Agatha Winston, prior to the occasion on which Ethel's outburst made him

scrutinize it, had been a passive, casual and divided affair. He was oppressed by her prodigality in the matter of cheques, but her personal qualities, as encountered now and again at the bookkeeper's wicket, measurably offset her defects as a depositor. He was inclined to like her, without ceasing to deplore her propensity for increasing his labours. And Ethel's hostility appreciably strengthened his regard for its objective. For the first time he envisioned Agatha Winston as an asset. It was impossible not to see that Ethel envied him even his ignominious professional relations with her. Possibly, he thought, if he demonstrated an ability to carry that acquaintance into private life, Ethel would persuade his father to reconsider the edict of expulsion. She generally got what she wanted. If she wanted Gilbert to stay, it was fairly certain that he would be tolerated after the period of grace had expired.

But, as he settled to his daily grist of checks, it was not altogether as a possible buffer against family wrath that Gilbert was considering Agatha Winston.

The idea of knowing her a little better, even at some expense in effort, appealed to him as distinctly a desirable process.

III

'OH—HELLO.' Agatha Winston had a trick of smiling with her eyes. Gilbert, conscious of their cheerful glow, found himself curiously reassured. Ethel was all wrong about this girl. He grinned without haste. Miss Winston hesitated. Something about Gilbert's look and posture seemed to remove their encounter at the corner from the realm of the casual.

"What are you doing away out here so early, Mr. Blaik? Has anybody been overdrawing his account?"

"Live here," said Gilbert, moving his head two inches in the direction of the new house. Her eyes followed the gesture, revealed a moment of puzzled doubt, and then widened in understanding.

"Oh—you're one of *those* Blaiks! I didn't know—I've always spelled you the other way, you see." He felt a change in her. "I've met your sister and mother, several times."

"Step," Gilbert qualified. He fancied that her

attitude underwent another alteration. She laughed.

"I *thought* you were—different," she said, incautiously. Her glance inspected his loose, comfort-considering suit, the soft collar, and the burnt-umber scarf which blended with the tint of the tweeds. Gilbert was uneasy under it. His laxity in the matter of dress had served as theme for many household indictments. Jim and Art, like their father, were exceedingly careful about clothes. They wore "business-suits" which fully warranted the tailor's term; their collars were uncompromising and their neckwear chosen with a strong conservatism as to price and pattern.

"I'm the black sheep," he said.

Her eyes crinkled. "And a banker!"

"All hustlers but me," he explained. "Going down?"

A trolley swerved into sight around the bend. Paying her fare provided him with a distinct thrill. It was his first experience with the pallid survival of an age of velvet cloaks and muddy streets and queens in silken slippers. It seemed, moreover, to entitle him to share a cross-seat with her. Again he informed himself that Ethel didn't know what she was talking about. Agatha Winston couldn't

have been any friendlier. He felt sure of this, although it was purely intuitive. He generally knew whether people liked him or not, without being told.

"You're not a—a hustler, then?" She took up the conversation where the car had interrupted it. Strangely enough, Gilbert felt that she thought none the worse of him for his defect. He shook his head.

"Lazy. Born that way, I guess."

She laughed. "Me, too."

Gilbert opened his eyes. "You hate work?"

"Like poison."

He permitted this to mushroom slowly in his brain. Of course it was different with a girl. Girls weren't expected to like work, in the male style, at least. But to have Agatha Winston admit the charge of laziness without visible penitence, seemed in some recondite fashion to establish a bond of sympathy. They exchanged more detailed views on the topic of industry until the car turned, groaning, at the bank corner. As he rose, Gilbert ventured boldly.

"Like to come'n' see you, sometime."

For just a pulse-beat her eyes measured him. Then they smiled.

"I wish you would," she told him.

"Tonight?"

She reflected briefly. "All right." They shook hands. It occurred to Gilbert, subsequently, that she shook hands as if she meant it. Ethel was certainly wrong. There wasn't any nonsense about Agatha Winston. Nice girl. He felt something wanting in the characterization. Adverbs were missing from his vocabulary, as a rule, but he made an exception. Darned nice.

Even the emphasis of the altered phrase seemed inadequate, as he contemplated her against the harmonic background of the Winston library that evening. It was not a mere appeal to the eye, which was undeniably perceptible, but something far more fundamental. Gilbert did not at once identify it. He was only conscious of a delightful repose, a pervading peace and quietude, of which Agatha Winston seemed to be the source.

She talked, to be sure, but not in the least as Ethel talked. There was none of Ethel's restless, hurrying quality in her speech. Merely hearing Ethel's voice affected him with a dull ache of weariness. Agatha Winston's rested him.

Yes. A *darned* nice girl.

His protective colouring of silence, acquired as

defence against family disapproval, served him better than he knew. Agatha Winston's experience with young men had not taught her to look for willing listeners. A man who actually preferred not to discuss himself was a novelty. A mild friendliness for this odd, still, rather nice-looking person merged into something slightly more transitive.

Gilbert discovered, with a pang of sympathy, that she wasn't the butterfly he had imagined. She managed the household herself, and he retained a lively conception of what housekeeping involved, a detesting realization of its infinite drudgery which went back to vivid mental pictures of damp, unfriendly floors and the swirling of a hostile mop.

He knew, of course, that this girl did not wear a towel about her hair or steam over Monday tubs, but he realized that there was weariness in even vicarious labour. He hated work which demanded doing by his own hands, but he conceived, on that first evening, a vastly more intense dislike for toil which had chosen Agatha Winston as its victim.

He discovered that he had no desire to impress Ethel with the tale of his adventure. He had languidly enjoyed the prospect of flattening her

with the news, but, as he reviewed the evening, the idea lost its appeal. He did not analyze his motives. He simply didn't want to talk about Agatha Winston. It didn't occur to him to admire himself for the restraint. If being a gentleman had demanded effort, Gilbert would not have been one. He had a divided attitude toward the term. It had been applied to him, frequently, as a final reproach. A gentlemen of leisure. He knew, vaguely, that it was a disgraceful thing to be, and yet both of its component words persisted in possessing a favourable connotation. His decision to say nothing of his visit was merely symptomatic.

He fell into a habit of slipping away from home for a place in the Winston library, a deep, soothing chair set in amiable shadows, from which he could watch Agatha while she talked. He made no endeavour to stir her liking. He was purely passive—a person to be tolerated or excluded as she wished.

He manifested much the same attitude toward Peter Winston, whose acquaintance he made on the occasion of his third visit, except that he harboured a touch of prejudice against Agatha's father which made him even less disposed to earn that gentleman's regard.

Peter Winston's name appeared on too many cheques.

Gilbert had acquired a faint but abiding resentment for the head of the biggest department store in the city. He held Winston responsible for a considerable share of the detestable business of banking, and for its demands on the reluctant energies of Gilbert Blaik. Not even his relationship toward Agatha quite redeemed him. Wherefore it did not occur to Gilbert to bestir himself to make Peter Winston like him.

Again he profited by contrast. Agatha liked him better because he permitted himself to be taken for granted, instead of laying an industrious siege about her regard. Her father, on whose horizon Gilbert was no more than an inoffensive blur, spared him the distrust with which more insistent visitors were considered.

For Gilbert the new conditions of existence served to endow the bank with an added odium. It interfered, now, with possibilities even more inviting than mere leisure. Chained to his post by a linked succession of cheques, while his mind reached out wistfully to the cool verandah at the side of the Winston house, with an indolent whisper of wind fluttering the awnings and Agatha's soothing

speech against this obbligato, he acquired a steadily intensifying hatred of the dull, futile routine which enslaved him. Hitherto his dislikes, in common with his desires, had been passively neutral. Now, he envisioned work as something which was not merely unpleasant but actively hostile, a meddlesome trespasser on a paradise of inaction, toward which he conceived a positive and definite abhorrence. He hated work as he hated meanness and cruelty and the malice of sly tongues. It was like a huge, brutal giant, amusing a senseless savagery by the antics of scuttling, frantic human beings.

Even Agatha's cheques were part of it. He forgave her for them, but he continued to consider them as marring defects in a person otherwise approximating perfection. She was reckless with them—cheques for spitefully uneven sums, cheques for less than a dollar, and for wearisome combinations of dollars and cents in which the only digit wanting was the relatively friendly zero.

Other people's cheques annoyed him. Agatha's somehow came to distress him. They seemed to hint of a sort of selfishness, a want of consideration which amounted, almost, to deliberate unkindness. Several times he ventured a cautious reference to

the matter, hoping that she would realize what her thoughtlessness involved for him. But she always seemed to regard it as faintly comical that he should be in a position to observe her expenditures as with, she said, a bird's-eye view. His point completely evaded her understanding. It was a pity, Gilbert thought, that such a nice girl, such a *doggone* nice girl, should be a victim of the abhorrent vice of cheque-writing.

Gradually he found his ideas centring on cheques as the embodiment of work. They made trouble for the postman who delivered them, the driven mail-clerks condemned to sort them, the harried cashiers who received and endorsed and deposited them, for the bank which collected and the bank which paid. He glowered at them as they passed in endless procession before him. He dreamed of a world in which they were unknown. . . .

He was in this mood when he discovered Agatha in the very act of indulging her deplorable weakness. Their intimacy had developed with the imperceptible and effortless growth of a plant, and even Peter Winston seemed to accept Gilbert's presence as an entirely natural phenomenon. The servants reflected this attitude, so that there was nothing extraordinary in his being admitted to the

library on a rainy Sunday afternoon which Agatha had chosen to profane with her cheque-book and a fluent pen.

Gilbert permitted the convenient force of gravitation to draw him into the embrace of his favourite chair, and looked on with mounting displeasure as Agatha filled out and blotted the odious strips of tinted paper and enclosed them in separate envelopes. To Gilbert it was like watching a thoughtless child scattering a paper snow-storm on a floor presently to be swept. He endured it until his restraint cracked under the swelling of his emotion.

"Making work f'r me, Agatha."

She looked up, startled at the note of reproach in his voice. "I'm sorry." Her pen hovered over a fresh blank. "I never thought about your part of it. It's such a nuisance for me that I—"

He stared. "You mean you don't *like* it?"

"Like it!" She laughed. "I thought you and I agreed about work, Gilbert. We both hate it, don't we? This is my work—the worst part of it, anyway. Bills and cheques—bills and cheques—forever and ever, amen! I never catch up with them. I write them in my sleep! You think it's

work just to enter them in your old ledgers. How would you like to have to write them out, one by one—fill in the tiresome old numbers and the date and the same everlasting names of stores and people and—and even have to put in the amount twice? Like it!"

Gilbert sat intensely still. A weight lifted happily from his mind. At least Agatha wasn't showering him with her cheques out of sheer carelessness. She hated the beastly things as much as he did! His vague dream of a paradise devoid of perforated bits of coloured paper became suddenly a compelling vision. Even Agatha, whom he had imagined hopelessly addicted to cheque-writing as a sort of insidious vice, would rejoice in the abolition of this common nuisance!

The idea seized him, as she returned to her task. If Agatha hated it, perhaps even Mrs. Andrew B. Selleck hated it, too. Perhaps everybody hated it—even old Mason himself. Perhaps all the people whom he had regarded as devoted to cheques as to a sacred cult would be willing to abandon them. The institution which had seemed part of the very universe suddenly lost its dismaying formidableness. Perhaps it was only waiting for a touch to topple over into the discard-heap

of civilization, along with the wreckage of other outworn superstitions.

He lengthened his arm to secure a sheet of note-paper from Agatha's desk and found a pencil in his pocket. Very slowly he began to see a way of minimizing work in its nearest and most hateful manifestation. Presently he interrupted Agatha again.

"Suppose you only had to write one cheque to pay all your bills?"

"Suppose something else," she said, without looking up. "What's the use of dreaming about impossibilities? Fourteen and sixty-seven one hundredths. . . . There, you made me spoil that one!"

"Look here." He held the sheet of note-paper before her. "Suppose you had a cheque-form like that. Just a list of the people you pay every month, you know." Long familiarity with the recipients of her bounty had enabled him to set down some twenty names in a vertical column, with a crudely ruled space at the right. "Just put the right amount after each one, write in any extra ones on blank spaces, add up figures and sign at bottom." He pointed to the form he had written below.

Central Bank. Pay to the order of the payees listed above the sum opposite the name of each, and charge to my account the total, Dollars.

"There. Easier, eh?"

"I should say so." Her voice was faintly wistful. "If it would work it would be just wonderful——"

"Work all right." He surveyed it approvingly. "Send it to bank. One envelope. One stamp. Nothing to do till the first."

"And the bank would do the rest?" She was interested. He nodded. Then, as it dawned upon him that he had merely saddled the labour of the depositor on the clerical force of the bank, he shook his head. "No. Bank wouldn't bother. More work than now. Too bad."

Agatha resumed her work. He contemplated his impracticable scheme regretfully. If everybody dealt with one bank, now . . . he saw, vividly, the tremendous reduction in labour to be accomplished by the elimination of clearings and the reduction of cheques to some such form as the one he had sketched. Just a debit of one lump sum to one account, and a distribution of credits to the others. A matter, merely, of a deposit-slip

to be turned over to the recipient. One voucher to be handled instead of forty or fifty. One transaction instead of scores.

He visualized it personally, of course. What he saw, receding inexorably from him like an air-castle dissolving into mist, was a picture of Gilbert Blaik, the S-to-Z ledgers closed for the day, departing with cashiers and vice-presidents; long, lazy afternoons under the Winston awnings, instead of detestable servitude at the bank. . . . Agatha, relieved of her financial housekeeping, condemned to mere minutes of accountancy each month. . . . It was too bad it wouldn't work. Of course, if everybody banked at the Central—but he knew better than to pursue that patent will-o'-the-wisp. He saw the pencilled sketch slide from the desk as Agatha moved her elbow. No use moving merely to pick it up. He could do that when he got up to go, just as well.

Peter Winston spared him even that. He paused on his way through the room to inform Gilbert needlessly that it was a damp day, and his eye caught the abandoned sheet. He glanced at it as he lifted it.

"What's all this?"

Gilbert foresaw distressing consequences.

Agatha didn't object to lazy people, but he was fairly certain that her father did. He smiled placatingly.

"Sort of idea I had. Make it easier for Agatha to pay her bills."

Winston studied it. "Who told you about this?"

Gilbert's rooted instinct for effortless truth overbore a faint temptation to shelter his guilt under anonymity. "Nobody. Just thought of it—"

"Nmph!" Winston's brows drew together. "Good thing for me if it would work. Cut collection-costs in two, at least."

"How?" Agatha looked up, interested.

"Have most trouble collecting from people who just keep putting off the job of writing cheques. Can't press 'em too much and can't make 'em pay without pressing. Bad problem in every store. People who haven't got money pay as soon as they can, and expect to be reminded. People with lots of it pay when they feel like it and get mad if you mail 'em a statement on the first."

"But I don't see how—" Agatha frowned slightly.

"Simple enough. They're all used to paying

some of their bills on the dot. Gas—electricity—telephone. Monopolies won't let 'em take their own sweet time. If they could pay all their bills with no more trouble than it takes to pay those two or three necessary ones, a lot of 'em would do it."

He turned a speculative eye on Gilbert.

"You're a banker. What's wrong with this stunt? Why wouldn't it work?"

Gilbert was relieved, but puzzled. Winston didn't seem to find anything disgraceful in this evidence of his laziness. For the first time, indeed, he detected a distinct note of approval in the brisk, abrupt speech. He didn't understand this. Winston, in his fashion, was as helplessly addicted to work as George Blaik himself, as contemptuous, presumably, of people who were bone-lazy, who hated effort, who tried to avoid it. But he was reassured intuitively by the tone and glance.

"It would work," he said, with a faint animation, "if all those firms banked at the Central. Then we'd only have to debit and credit, inside the bank. But it wouldn't work if we had to send out cashier's cheques. That would mean more trouble for us than the old way."

Winston reflected briefly. Gilbert saw a queer

look, something like respect, come over his alert formidable countenance. To his embarrassed amazement he saw Winston's hand extended toward him in a gesture capable of only one interpretation. He submitted to a vigorous grip. Winston's other hand clapped smartly on the shoulder.

"You're a wonder, Gilbert. If anybody'd offered to bet me that I'd ever open an account in that one-horse, ramshackle institution of yours I'd have given him any odds he asked for. But you win. I didn't spot you, at first. You've got the right idea, with a man like me. Made me sell myself. Good work. Tell your people our treasurer will be in, tomorrow. Hold on, though—you owe me something for putting it over like that. We'll carry a balance with you on condition you give us the first line in that list of yours. Haven't sold it yet, have you?"

"No." Gilbert was dazed. He foresaw a number of unpleasant complications. What would Mason say when the Winston treasurer came in? He'd get into all sorts of tiresome trouble for having meddled with the bank's business. "I just thought up the idea," he said. "The bank doesn't know anything about it——"

Again Winston administered an accolade. "All the better! Pulled it off absolutely on your own, eh? And I've been thinking you were just a chair-warmer! You tell Phil Mason he owes you the best dinner in town. Mason'll crow, of course, landing us, after all these years. But I'll see that he doesn't grab the credit for himself. Gilbert, that's a whale of an idea. Where'd you get hold of it?"

Gilbert managed to shake his head. He was still dubious about the bank's reception of any innovation conceived in indolence and born in sloth, although Peter Winston's confidence dulled the edge of his keener apprehensions.

"Got it out of your head, eh? Might have guessed you had something in there. Don't talk. More I see of talkers the better I like people that can hold their tongues. You fooled me once, but you won't do it again. Got your measure, now."

He went out. Gilbert stared after him. There was some mistake, of course. He wasn't clever. He wasn't even desirous of being clever. Cleverness required hard work—the hardest kind. They'd be sure to find him out. As for Agatha, she'd known all along that he was just lazy. He might deceive her father, but not—

Her voice came to him, curiously warm and alive.

"Oh, Gilbert! I always knew you had it in you! I—I just felt it, from the very first! I——"

Gilbert interrupted firmly. It would be fine to have Agatha shelter these favouring misapprehensions, but it wasn't quite square to be a party to her self-deception.

"All mistake. Nothing to me except laziness. Bone laziness."

"Oh, splash!" said Agatha.

IV

THE interview with Mason at the bank, toward which Gilbert drove himself under the spur of a conviction that this course involved less effort than silence and subsequent explanations, proved even more perplexing than Peter Winston's mysterious behaviour.

Mason, a dynamic personality, radiated energy in even his rare intervals of repose. He was lean, especially as to neck, and his eyes glowed behind compound lenses with an effect of inner fires and high pressures above them. Gilbert's contempt for his passionate affection for work was tempered by an unwilling respect for his authority, and a deeper awe of his far-ramifying intelligence. He listened like a bad-tempered bird, his head tilted perilously on the inadequate neck, his swift impatient speech interjected tartly at every pause in Gilbert's plodding confession.

"Yes—yes. Go on."

"So I thought a cheque-form something like this might——"

"Let's see. What's all this?" The words ran together with the effect of a snapping lash. The bird-like eye seemed to absorb Gilbert's crude sketch in a single, begrudging instant. A skeleton finger descended on one of the pearl-topped buttons inset in the desk. The left hand flashed toward the telephone.

Gilbert, awaiting sentence, stood uncomfortably out of the way while an office-boy, galvanized to electrical agility by a single radiation from Mason's presence, sped away in search of McQuade, the bank's "new-business" man, while Mason's clipping voice streamed into the telephone, commanding remoter personages to attend him . . . printers . . . an advertising-agency . . . Gilbert was affronted by the spectacle of an activity almost indecently intense. . . . A patent-lawyer, too. . . . He shook his head helplessly as the thing deepened in mystery. An ameliorating circumstance was that his insignificance was lost in this turmoil. Mason ignored his existence until, in an interval of impatient delay at the telephone, he banished him with a single, expelling swoop of his disengaged arm.

Gilbert retreated strategically to his ledgers. He was apprehensive as well as puzzled. These

explosions of Mason's had a way of injecting activity into the nethermost layers of the bank's stratification. Vaguely Gilbert foresaw a recurrence of that unpleasant effect as the result of his accidental interposition. He was not surprised when summoned again to Mason's office.

Here, confronted by McQuade and a remarkably terrier-like young gentleman from the advertising agency, he was bidden to elucidate his idea. A benign and placid old man nodded cheerfully from the other side of the Directors' table. There was nothing fevered or frenzied about him, and Gilbert found himself addressing his fumbling explanations to the only sympathetic auditor. Mason's foot tapped impatiently as Gilbert ordered his words, and his voice cut in flashingly in every pause.

"See it, McQuade? You can take it out and club every retailer in town into line. No account, no place on the cheque. With Winston to start, they're bound to follow."

Or: "Get that, Sopworth—make a good smashing line for street-car card. 'Pay all your bills with one cheque'—we'll play it both ways. Get more women's accounts, too. Go after men, for that matter. This scheme ought to hit every

doctor and minister and lawyer hard. Make a note. Go on, Blaik."

Gilbert finished. The benign old gentleman nodded amiably. "It may not prove a patentable matter," he said, "but we can copyright the cheque form and try for a patent, anyway. Just the application will scare most imitators into getting permission. Better let them have it on a small royalty basis. It will save litigation and earn revenue."

There was much talk, of which Gilbert understood one word in three. He gathered, however, that he was in excellent favour with everybody. And when he was left alone with Mason, finally, the wispy little man actually went through the motions of a grin.

"Well, Blaik—we'll make this right with you, of course—patent and copyright in your name."

"Thanks," said Gilbert, conservatively. He waited. At the Central Bank one did not depart without permission from Mason's presence. But Mason put a different construction on his delay.

"Well? Want anything right now? Speak up—try to be fair about it—"

Gilbert understood the state of mind in which sundry characters of infantile fable had listened

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to the godmother's tender of pre-fulfilled wishes.
He drew in his breath slowly.

"Yes, sir. Like——" He stopped. The thing was unthinkable, on Monday.

"Well?" Mason snapped.

"Like day off," said Gilbert.

V

GEORGE BLAIK inspected his youngest son with a visibly diminished disfavour. Gilbert, who usually contrived to avoid it, encountered the steady glance and found himself unable to escape. Uneasiness stirred in him. He remembered that Mason knew his father. He might have told. But George Blaik spoke almost cordially.

"Well, Gilbert, you've done it, I hear. I'm glad. I hated the idea of putting you out, but I'd have done it. You had just two weeks left."

Gilbert felt still more uneasy. He almost wished that Mason *had* told. It would have saved Gilbert trouble.

"I knew you had it in you to get ahead, if you wanted to," Blaik continued in the manner of one who extracts a sound moral from its shell and exhibits it for respectful attention. "But I'd begun to think you were too lazy even to want to. And when Mason stopped me on the street, this morning, and actually *congratulated* me—well, I was

mighty near being proud of you, Gilbert. If you'd done it without my having to threaten——”

“What did Mr. Mason tell you, papa?” Ethel was privileged to interrupt even these discourses. George Blaik beamed at her.

“He said the directors were going to make Gilbert a teller——”

“*Were.*” Gilbert felt that further postponement could only aggravate matters. He gave the word an inflection which caught his father's ear. The satisfaction faded visibly from the paternal glance.

“Do you mean they didn't?” His voice tightened.

Gilbert nodded guiltily.

“Why not?” The ominous rumble of nearing thunder.

“Wouldn't take it.” Gilbert wagged his head. “Teller!” The memory of injustice warmed him. He forgot to be afraid of his father's terrible eye. “Want to make me stand up all day! And twice as much work, too, with all those new accounts. Huh! Nice thing!”

There was a moment of the breathless stillness which heralds the bolt. The storm broke.

“I wouldn't have believed it if you hadn't told

me yourself! So—so all-fired lazy that you'd actually turn down a promotion rather than let even your feet work! I suppose you think I'll go back on my word and let you keep on—nothing but a dashed bookkeeper——”

“Not bookkeeper.” Gilbert cut through the mounting crest of the wave. “Quit.”

Another silence. Then, very gently. “Oh, you quit, did you? Yes. I suppose you might call it that. But I'm betting that Phil Mason calls it something else. He'd know what to do with anybody that had the nerve to tell him——”

“Got sore,” conceded Gilbert. “Real mad, at first. Cooled down when I told him, though. Said I was right.”

“Right!” Blaik laughed. “Yes, he would say that. You bet he'd say it was right for any such—such—oh, there's no word that comes near fitting you—to get out of his bank and stay out.” He breathed audibly. “Of course you'd choose the right time, too—just when the bank's waked up and started after business in earnest—just when it's introduced a revolution in business-practice that's the biggest step ahead in twenty years—just when you had a heaven-sent chance to tie up with the liveliest wire in sight—you quit!”

Gilbert rose. "Uhm-hm. Too much work around there, now. Crowd in there all the time. Everybody in a hurry. Hate it. Like it better with Winston's."

"Winston's?" Blaik caught at the word.
"You've got a job over there?"

Gilbert nodded.

"Well, I guess that's nearer your speed, after all. Selling ribbons—"

Ethel moaned at the social catastrophe the idea instantly suggested. Gilbert turned toward her.

"Don't worry, Ethel. 'Sall right. I don't sell ribbons." He glanced at his father. "Y'see I invented that cheque scheme you think's so efficient. And Mr. Winston says that anybody that hates work hard enough to do that doesn't belong in any bank. Wants me to hang around his store and see if I can't hate some work in there, same way. Funny. I always thought it was laziness that ailed me, but I guess I was wrong. Mr. Winston calls it—"

He paused and met his father's blank eye with a glint of good-humoured malice.

"He says all 'ts matter with me is a mighty near fatal case of efficiency."

He glanced again at Ethel. "Agatha calls it some'n else," he said deliberately stressing the name. "She says I'm nothing but a **lazy duckling** that turned out to be a genius."

THE BUCKPASSE

I

As it became manifest that he was not to be discharged, Wilbur Haskett was conscious of something like disappointment. Not that he actually enjoyed the process of ouster—it had distressing concomitants and consequences which he exceedingly disliked—but he had discovered that it also possessed redeeming qualities. In some respects, indeed, it was distinctly better to be fired than to be hired. He had a liberal acquaintance with both.

Dismissal had, at its worst, a refreshing finality. It closed a chapter with a thumping full-stop leaving Wilbur in no perplexity concerning his course. Usually, too, it involved a rather explosive interview, and the effect of emerging to the relative calm of the outer air was like the agreeable peace which supersedes the thunder-storm. But most of all Wilbur liked the entire freedom of

responsibility which he had found to be the inalienable privilege of the dischargee.

Whatever the alleged reasons leading up to dismissal, it was incontestable that Wilbur himself had had no vote or voice in the decision itself. To be fired, indeed, connoted a passivity equivalent to that of the acquiescent missile in the cannon's angry mouth. Always, after his adventures in discharge, Wilbur had something of the light, joyous irresponsibility of the thistledown, the sense of being carried in a current against which there was neither means nor obligation to struggle. This consciousness of release he had begun to enjoy in anticipation when Mr. Thurlow explicitly disclaimed sinister intentions.

"I've had first-rate reports about you, Haskett. You seem to be the only man in the office who hasn't earned half a dozen grudges. And you seem to know your work, too."

Wilbur fumbled for a response and compromised on a grin, which committed him to nothing. It was clear that he was not to be fired just yet. This being evident, the interview lost interest at once. He watched Mr. Thurlow politely, aware of an unfamiliar anxiety in the president's face. Thomas Thurlow usually exhibited a mien of aloof

and impressive dignity. He was a tall, big-boned man, and the years had added a certain effect of power to his bulk. His lips, in their normal aspect, fitted nicely together; the deep line curving from nostril around the end of the mouth registered a fixity of purpose, a determination, which Wilbur found rather awe-inspiring. But today there was an obvious touch of indecision, of concern, in the pink, clean-shaven face, a note of dubiety in the voice.

"Larner himself speaks well of you," pursued Thurlow, in the tone of one who argues with himself. "You're the only man in the outfit he has a good word for. I'd be disposed to doubt his judgement if it weren't confirmed by Mr. McIlhenny and Mr. Torbitt. And the men on the road all seem to like you, too."

Again Wilbur confined himself to a grin, but he began to be uneasy. All this compliment plainly led up to something. He could not foresee the conclusion, but the premise made him mildly uncomfortable. He thought, almost wistfully, of occasions on which he had listened to very different opinions of his character and ability.

"I'd hesitate to do it, on my own judgement," pursued Thurlow. "You're pretty young, and

your record, before you came to us, looks discouraging. In fact I wouldn't have given you a trial, in the first place, if it hadn't been for your father. But you've done well, as far as I can find out, and I'm so sick and tired of straightening out quarrels that I'm inclined to take more of a chance than I ought to."

He passed his hand across his forehead, as if to iron out the lines which grooved it vertically. Wilbur, without knowing why, was suddenly sorry for him. He looked old and tired and worried.

"Larner's a first-class man," said Thurlow. "We were glad to get him. He's a live wire. But—" he swung a hand wearily—"he's no diplomat. He's stirred up a fuss with every other department-head in the factory; he's rubbed all the travellers the wrong way. He's even got us into fights with some of our best customers. And he won't compromise, won't give an inch."

Wilbur nodded. For these very qualities A. W. Larner commanded his reluctant admiration. Ever since he had begun his labour as assistant to the sales manager he had observed Larner's electric personality with something like awe. Energy crackled from A. W. Larner's finger-tips; decision rang in his voice; conviction was engraved

indelibly in his lean, grim lantern jaws. Aware of his own lamentable shortcomings in these respects, Wilbur regarded his superior with deepening reverence, untinged, however, with envy. The mere thought of emulating A. W. Larner's dynamic example made Wilbur feel tired. But he recognized the man's quality and paid it due measure of esteem.

"We've come to the show-down, at last," said Thurlow. "Larner demands a free hand in reorganizing the whole plant, or he'll quit. He wants to get rid of pretty nearly everybody; he wants to change the fixed policy of selling to the jewellery trade and go after department-store business instead; he wants—oh, I don't know what he doesn't want. It doesn't matter. I'm letting him quit."

Wilbur started. This was catastrophic. He got on beautifully with A. W. Larner. Working under a man who never asked or accepted suggestions, who exacted only meticulous obedience, was precisely what suited Wilbur's tastes and abilities. A new chief would be quick to discover his defects—just as these had been detected in the other jobs he had held and lost.

He brightened slightly at the thought. In that

case he would probably be fired, anyway. He was beginning to be tired of the routine which had engaged him, surprisingly, for two years. A change would be refreshing. Still, the thought of the Thurlow Clock Works without A. W. Larner was disquieting. He shook his head at it. Thurlow compressed his lips.

"Of course I could advertise for a new sales manager," he said. "But that means breaking in an outsider, and Larner's stirred up the force so that they're all going round with chips on their shoulders, looking for trouble. Or I could bring in one of the travellers. But if I do that I'll have to fill his place on the road, and the other men will be sore. I—what do you think, Haskett?"

He shot the question at Wilbur abruptly, in the fashion which always distressed him. Questions should be propounded, he felt, gradually, diplomatically, giving a fellow a chance to look them over before formulating an answer. He shook his head, as if thinking deeply. Instinct served him well. You could always sidestep these formidable issues, leave them to somebody else who liked volunteering opinions.

"Why, if I were you, sir—" Wilbur liked the disclaimer involved in the supposition. Somehow

it seemed always to remove him a little farther from the position of responsibility for what he said. "If I were you," he repeated, for emphasis as well as time, "I'd ask the travellers about it, and the other department-heads, too." He brightened. "You see, if they suggest some course it—it makes them responsible for it. They can't very well complain if you do what they want——"

Thurlow looked pleased. "That's exactly what I have done," he said. "Only I hadn't reasoned it out like that. And they all agree, for once."

Wilbur breathed more easily. He'd avoided that one very well. He prepared himself for the next pitfall. But Thurlow had no more questions. He recovered a measure of his normal assurance, his brief display of indecision abruptly ended.

"I've put it up to them and they've agreed on what they want. So, rather against my own judgment, I'm going to let 'em have their way. I'm going to make you sales manager, Haskett, and give you a free hand as far as I can. You know the business, you know the men, you know the problems we're up against. Go ahead and show what you can do."

He offered his hand with some formality.

Mechanically Wilbur sealed the compact with his own, his mind flattened under the shock.

Sales manager! Wilbur Haskett enthroned in the mighty place of A. W. Larner, confronted by the array of momentous decisions which Larner had made so magnificently unaided. Wilbur Haskett, obliged to decide not only his own problems, but those of a terrifying number of other men—Wilbur Haskett, whose instinct was to evade even a trivial issue, to lean on the discretion of stronger minds and clearer wills, deprived of even an advisory superior!

"It's a big chance—and a big job," he heard Thurlow saying. "It needs brains, which I think you've got, and diplomacy, which I know you've got, but most of all it needs backbone—initiative. And whether you've got them we'll have to find out."

Refusal, excuse, rose to Wilbur's lips. Better tell him now and get it over with. It would save a lot of trouble. But as always he shrank from any final step. Perhaps it would be wiser to wait and ask advice—talk it over with his father, anyway. Yes, it wouldn't do any harm to let Thurlow wait for a decision—

"I don't expect you to be prepared with ideas

right now, of course. You weren't expecting this any more than I was, and it probably startles you——”

“Yes, sir,” gasped Wilbur. “It takes me right off my feet.”

Plainly this pleased the president. It showed a proper spirit of modesty and appreciation. He looked more benevolent.

“That's right. Think it over for a day or two. Larner isn't leaving till next week, and you and he will have a good deal of detail to arrange between you. If you need an assistant——”

“I will.” Wilbur was in no doubt whatever about this. “There's too much work for one man.”

“Yes. Larner says so, too. He suggested that we might move up Miss Carston and get a new stenographer to take her place.”

Wilbur snatched hopefully at the idea. Miss Carston was a very militant lady indeed. He visualized her firm chin with a sense of refuge.

“All right, then. You'd better talk to her yourself. Give you a better standing with her if she deals with you. She'll want a raise, of course. Keep it down as low as you can. And about yourself—you'll be wanting something in that line, too. How much?”

Wilbur spread his hands. "I—I'll leave that to you, sir. Whatever you say——"

He saw that Thurlow was pleased at this attitude, and he felt a stab of self-reproach for his weakness. If he'd spoken up boldly he might have got as much as twenty-five a week. Now, of course——"

"Well, I want to be fair. You're an experiment, of course, and I'm not going to give you what we've been paying Larner, but—call it thirty-five, for the present. If you make good, we'll do the fair thing."

"Y-Yes, sir. Thanks." Wilbur made his escape, puzzled. By all the laws of nature he should have suffered for his besetting sin of passing the buck. Evading responsibility had cost him one job after another. Here, apparently, it had earned him promotion and fixed his pay higher, by ten dollars a week, than downrightness could have achieved.

To be sure it wouldn't—couldn't last long. He saw that under A. W. Larner's dominating personality there had been neither need nor room for self-assertion on the part of Wilbur Haskett. Now, deprived of that overshadowing superior, standing revealed in his own colours, he would

certainly be found out and discharged in a few weeks. As he went back to his desk he contemplated the future in a divided mood. It was almost his usual state of mind, this balanced hesitation between alternatives.

On the one side, the dignity and honours and emoluments of the new position, a rise from the obscurity and servitude of a clerkship, a partial rehabilitation in the estimate of the people at home; on the other, the appalling prospect of responsibility, the demand for instant decisions, the need, as Thurlow had put it, of initiative.

Wilbur detested the word. It had come to represent a meaning far broader than Noah Webster would have countenanced. It stood for an entire philosophy against which all of Wilbur Haskett's impulses and instincts rebelled. Initiative involved a habit of conceiving original thoughts, plus the more abhorrent processes of weighing them, reforming them, passing judgment on them. People with initiative actually enjoyed thinking up things to do. Nor did they pause there—forthwith they made up their minds to do these things. Sometimes, under peculiar circumstances, Wilbur envied such people, but below that envy was a secret pity—making

trouble for themselves, inviting mental stresses and physical labours perfectly avoidable by mere abstinence from effort. These strains, too, must be endured by others. When they involved Wilbur in their widening ripples of consequence he stopped envying and pitying, and gave himself singly to resentment.

And now he was either to serve this hungry deity himself or forfeit his unexpected honours. Either prospect was depressing. He listened absently to congratulations from A. W. Larner, suddenly less august and formidable, from old McIlhenny of the Costs Department, and Torbitt who came over from his credit-files to shake him by the hand. They didn't know his secret forebodings, to be sure, but somehow their speech comforted him. If they were all so certain that it was a matter for congratulations, perhaps it might turn out that way, after all.

Wilbur Haskett thought unpleasantly of initiative, but the referendum exactly suited his tastes.

II

"YOU'VE evidently turned over a new leaf. That's very good. But it's just as easy to blot one page of a ledger as another, Wilbur. The thing you've got to do is to keep this leaf straight and clean."

Martin Haskett directed toward his son an eye in which approval and admonition were nicely balanced—the eye with which he was accustomed to regard successful applicants for loans. It was, therefore, a radically different eye from that which gleamed sternly on rejected applications, and yet more unlike that which beamed on borrowers of whose credit there could be no doubt. Wilbur was accurately aware of its divided quality, now. He wriggled slightly under it.

"Yes, sir."

"This is, after all, nothing but a blank page, on which you've got to write success or failure." Martin Haskett clung to the familiar idiom of his calling. "You've spoiled a good many of them, Wilbur."

"Yes, sir." Wilbur wriggled again.

"And you know why. We both know." Mr. Haskett paused to dissect the steak, his lips pursed. "It's because you—you persist in—in—" He scowled as he groped for the word. Dora, whose reverence for her father was perceptibly less than Wilbur's, supplied it.

"In passing the buck," she suggested. Martin Haskett compromised between a frown and a grin. Dora's laxity in the matter of English tormented his precise ear, but her gift of hitting squarely on the head of the nail delighted his passion for accuracy.

"To use an abominable slang phrase, yes." He nodded. "You've evaded responsibility consistently, all your life. You've formed a habit of letting other people make your decisions in big things and little ones alike. It's a dangerous weakness, Wilbur, and you've paid pretty heavily for encouraging it."

"Yes, sir." Wilbur devoted himself to the steak.

"Evidently you've made some progress toward overcoming it," continued his father, "or you wouldn't have won this promotion. But if you show the slightest tendency to go back to it, now,

you'll find that it will make trouble for you quicker than ever."

"Yes, sir."

"The measure of a man's success—any man's—is his ability to make up his mind. If I'd followed your system I'd still be a bookkeeper, instead of a cashier."

"Yes, sir." Wilbur meditated. This promised to continue all the way to dessert. He wished that he had waited till after dinner to explode his news.

"You've got to think for yourself. You've got to stand on your own feet, fight your own battles, make your own pace."

The words jarred on Wilbur's ear. He hated thinking. He hated standing. He hated even the thought of fighting. All his instincts bade him drift agreeably with whatever current was strong enough to carry him. Looking forward to a life-time of struggle and rivalry, he thought, wistfully, of the times that were gone.

It cheered him to hear his father's continuation. If Wilbur relapsed into his old, evil ways, prophesied Martin Haskett, he would certainly find himself back in his dishonourable servitude. There was always that avenue of release, thought Wilbur. It had its defects, to be sure, but the idea of it

comforted him, nevertheless, like the consciousness of a postern gate of escape with a siege in prospect. He wasn't absolutely condemned to initiative and responsibility for life. It was never too late, he reflected, to be fired.

The lecture was resumed in the living-room. He grew more and more uncomfortable under it, casting about for an excuse for flight. This presented, at once, the ordeal of making up his mind. He could go to a movie, for one thing; he could slip over to the club for billiards; he could visit some congenial young woman. Each of these courses presented attractions, between which he hesitated helplessly, inclining first to one and then another, while the paternal wisdom eddied and beat about him. Dora, returning from the telephone, solved the problem for him.

"Cynthia wants to talk to you, Wilbur." Her eyes danced with amiable malice. "I should think you'd call her up, sometimes, instead of letting her do it all. This makes three—no, four times—in one week."

Wilbur grinned. He liked Dora, in spite of her intrusions on his private affairs. Dora always had her mind made up in advance, a person of distinct and forceful opinions, and therefore exceedingly

useful as an oracle to her elder brother. It simplified things to ask Dora which necktie suited him best, for instance. She always seemed to know.

Cynthia Graydon's voice came over the wire with a pleasing definitude. She had a trick of crisp, staccato speech which Wilbur found restful. He liked her, in acquiescent fashion; it was easier to like Cynthia than not to, especially if she wanted to be liked. Also, his friendship with her improved his position in the household, particularly with his mother, to whom the social phase of the affair was mollifying. For that matter Martin Haskett himself manifestly approved of his son's acquaintance with the daughter of George Graydon. A cashier, after all, is a cashier, and bank-presidents are undeniably bank-presidents.

"Come on over, Wilbur."

"All right—if you want me to." Wilbur accepted the decision of the fates and Cynthia concerning the disposition of his evening. It occurred to him now that he much preferred to spend it with her, instead of watching the movies or playing cowboy with Lonnie Dexter at the club. He departed with a stubborn conviction that, whatever Martin Haskett said to the contrary, the habit of passing the buck yielded

excellent results under certain conditions. If he had determined to go to the club, for instance, he would have missed an evening with Cynthia.

His mood, as he found her waiting for him on the wide verandah at the side of the big, friendly house, was even more favourably inclined than usual toward her. She had extricated him from an indefinite lecture on an unpleasant theme. He discovered, in spite of a waning twilight, that she was nicer to look at than he had previously thought.

"We're going down the Shore Walk," she informed him. "Come on."

"All right." His approval deepened. Some girls would have asked him what he wanted to do, would have concealed their own preferences cunningly. Cynthia saved a fellow the nuisance of making up his mind.

He liked the way she walked, too, he decided. She brought her feet down with a sort of emphasis, so that the sound of them on the concrete was distinct, positive. He found himself telling her of his promotion. Her instant and obvious pleasure both charmed and alarmed him. It hadn't occurred to him, till now, to consider his place at the clock works as in any way connected with Cynthia's opinion of him. Now he saw quite

plainly that there was a relation. She was gratified in a degree which mere courtesy did not explain.

"I always knew you'd get on," she declared. "It used to make me so angry when—" she stopped. "I mean that I've always seen your possibilities. This is just a beginning, of course, but—"

"Yes. That's so." He retreated before the advance of a forbidding reflection that there were higher and more exigent positions than that of sales manager at the clock works. At the same time he became aware that Cynthia regarded such eminences as desirable.

"You'll go right on up," she stated. "I'm sure of it."

"Are you?" He scowled at the idea of giddier heights before him.

"Positive." She nodded. "But you'll have to work like everything. You will, though, won't you?"

"I—I suppose so." He scuffed his soles.

"It'll be interesting. Father says—I didn't mean to say that. I'm not supposed to repeat things he talks about at home, but it won't matter, with you. He says the clock works are slipping

down hill fast and that if they don't get some brainy men in charge pretty soon there'll be real trouble."

Wilbur nodded. He had absorbed this information easily enough during his apprenticeship under A. W. Larner. But it did not suggest itself as an added inducement.

"It'll be all the more credit for you to put the factory back on its feet," she continued. "I should think you'd be thrilled!"

Wilbur wagged his head. He was quite sure that he wasn't thrilled.

"I wish I had a chance like that for myself," she exclaimed. "It's such a tiresome thing to be a girl and forbidden to do anything interesting——"

Wilbur saw light. "If you feel like that," he said, more quickly than usual for him, "maybe you'd let me talk things over with you, sometimes. It—it helps to get an inside view, you know——"

"I'd adore it! Promise?"

"You bet." He was appreciably relieved. Here, at least, was one source of decision. And it would provide him, he foresaw, with an adequate reason for coming to see Cynthia, an automatic

answer to such self-questionings as had tormented him tonight. Between the club and the movies and Cynthia he would, henceforward, find it appreciably easier to decide.

III

A GENERAL, inclusive distaste for his new estate became specific as he contemplated the task of dealing with Miss Carston.

The most impressive quality of A. W. Larner's adequacy had been his complete dominance of this woman. Wilbur, even in the days of his agreeable insignificance, had been uneasy in her presence, had painfully avoided a pretence of authority. When obliged to dictate to her speeding, contemptuous pencil he had taken care to give the process the aspect of an amiable collaboration on Miss Carston's part, asking her advice as to words and phrases, thanking her when the finished work lay on his desk. Sometimes, watching her, under the direction of A. W. Larner's crisp commands, he had detected the sardonic unconsent registered in her compressed lip and secretly revered her untamed spirit. Now, elevated to authority above her, he must issue orders even as Larner had issued them, impose his will on this person-

age who had barely yielded to the extraordinary assertiveness of the late sales manager.

Wilbur recoiled from the prospect of even the relatively facile affair of raising her wages. But the thing, indubitably, had to be done. He summoned her, controlling a fluttering incertitude of voice.

"Miss Carston, I've decided—" He caught a gleam in her direct eye which checked him on the threshold of this attempted bravado. "Mr. Thurlow agrees with me," he amended, hurriedly, "that you can handle my old job better than some outsider."

"I could." Miss Carston's entire assurance relieved him. He nodded.

"If you're quite sure of it, you may take hold right away." It occurred to him that having her at his elbow would provide a trustworthy fountain of decision, to be tapped at will. He took heart again. It might be practicable to reverse the positions in fact if not in name. Instead of being obliged to order Miss Carston about he could use her as a prop and brace for his own conclusions. Surveying her unrelenting grimness he felt that here was a willing candidate for the passed buck. He brightened.

"It will be necessary to take on somebody in your old place. I—er—I think you're much better qualified to pass on stenographic ability than I am. Suppose you look after that matter?"

Again her resolute eye gleamed, but he was conscious of a difference. There was an effect of warmth in the flash, this time, a glow rather than a glitter.

"Very well." Miss Carston made a hieroglyphic on her book. "Salary?"

"I leave that to you," he said hastily. "I—I—" a path opened suddenly before him. "I believe in delegating as much authority as possible, Miss Carston. Without criticizing Mr. Larner's policy, it seems to me that he burdened himself with a great deal of unnecessary detail. I'm giving you practically a free hand, and I expect you to use it."

There was no doubt about the glow, this time. For the first time in their acquaintance he saw Miss Carston display symptoms of an imminent thaw. He was again inspired.

"About your own—er—salary. This new position naturally deserves better pay. But Mr. Thurlow is anxious to keep expenses down as far as possible, and of course it's to our advantage to

have our departmental overhead as low as we can make it. I'm going to ask you to fix your own pay, therefore. Hereafter, you see, we're going to —to think of this plant and this department as if we owned them."

"That's perfectly splendid!" Miss Carston's prominent chin perceptibly diminished its aggressiveness. "I'd like to say, once for all, that this policy will show results, Mr. Haskett. And I'll prove it. I can get a competent stenographer for twelve dollars—I know just the girl I want. You'd have had to pay her fifteen, anyway, but I've talked it over with her and she'll take twelve, if I deal with her. And for myself, I'll be satisfied with twenty. If it had been just a case of doing more work with no authority I'd have stood out for twenty-five. But the way you put it——"

"That's fine—fine!" Wilbur breathed deep. One of the abiding terrors of the new job receded rapidly into distant dimness. Of course he would eventually get himself into trouble by such expedients; successful men, like A. W. Larner and Martin Haskett and George Graydon, were those who shouldered responsibilities with an eager greed. Failures, like Wilbur, shuffled out from under. In

the end he would be discovered, condemned, flung out, as he deserved.

He looked forward to this event with something like hope. It was all very well to be in receipt of an enlarged wage, to enjoy a position of dignity in the sight of others, to be congratulated and respected and even envied, but the game, he perceived, was worth less than the candle.

A fellow lived only once. To spend that spangle of existence in acute discomfort, for the mere money's sake, was demonstrably the bargain of a fool. In spite of the ease with which he had contrived to evade the issue in Miss Carston's case, he was oppressed by a sense of isolation amid yammering problems which he and no one else must solve. And this condition would grow worse rather than better as time marched. The longer he clung to his unhappy eminence the harder it would be to endure it. The sooner he was unmasked and overthrown, the better. There would always be jobs—comfortable, friendly jobs, placing no strain on a man's soul and yet yielding a living. Hampton wasn't the world. He could emigrate. . . .

He yearned for the day of his downfall. He even meditated going frankly to Thomas Thurlow

and declaring his unfitness, but he drew back from a step so decisive. If he resigned it would be unquestionably his own deed, his own fault. There would be no excuse to advance at home. Better leave it to Thurlow. It wouldn't be long, at the worst and best of it.

Nevertheless, after his first few days, the sense of standing alone became unendurable. After delegating to Miss Carston so much of his proper work that only a trifling residue lay in his hands, he was still bent and suffocated under the weight of it.

Every day there were a dozen minor issues to be decided; he must tell Dugan whether to take the side trip to Kansas City or stay on his appointed route; he must answer Shelby's wired interrogation as to letting Bleistein and Levy return for full credit certain items of old stock alleged to be unsalable; he must advise Fraser as to the policy of giving the Ellsworth Company jobbers' prices. Every mail beset him with a multiplicity of such stresses.

And Thomas Thurlow, appeased by the results of his dealings with Miss Carston, was beginning to be inquisitive again, to ask him for suggestions, for "constructive ideas!"

He groped, under such a demand, for his favourite device of evasion, longing for the strength of character to resign at once and have done with it all, but aware that the thing was utterly beyond him.

"I'll be frank, Haskett. We've got to do something. We've been slipping down hill steadily." Thurlow's face exhibited a weariness which Wilbur could understand, now. His self-pity forsook him, for the moment, as he realized how much heavier a burden of responsibility and concern bore down on Thurlow's old shoulders. It was bad enough to be a mere sales manager, he had discovered. How much worse to stand where Thurlow stood! And yet there were people—his father, Cynthia—who believed that it was better to be Thomas Thurlow than Wilbur Haskett, that Wilbur himself was better off than he had been two weeks ago!

"It's all up to the sales end, Haskett. We can make the goods as well as ever, but we can't sell—that's the long and short of it. It's costing us more and more to get a dollar's worth of business; we aren't running to full capacity, either, and that sends up the overhead. I counted on Larner to find a way out for us, but he was hopeless. We can't destroy our whole business structure and

begin over again. We've got to find what's wrong with the concern as it stands, and dig up a way to correct it."

"Yes, sir." Wilbur spoke gravely. "That's my idea, exactly."

Under cover of the speech he fumbled in his mental darkness for something which would sidestep the issue thus put squarely up to him. It was instinct only which actuated this process, not a conscious desire to hide his incompetency and cling to his new job. The easy path out of every difficulty was to pass the buck. Usually he accomplished this quite easily, but today inspiration eluded him.

"I've had my eye on you, since you took hold," continued Thurlow. "I like the way you've gone at it—you've got rid of practically all the routine and detail. That was one trouble with Larner—he couldn't let go of anything. He wanted to have his finger in every little trifle. You seem to have the gift of making other people do things for themselves. It's a big part of executive ability, that."

"Yes, sir." Wilbur nearly grinned. If Thomas Thurlow remotely guessed the real reason why he had transferred seven tenths of his work

to Miss Carston's willing hands, he wouldn't call it executive ability! Hardly!

"That leaves you free to centre your mind on constructive work. You've begun well. But I'm worried. We can't go on like this. We've got to hammer out a new selling policy that will keep the plant busy—and I'm hoping that you'll see something practical in that line mighty soon, Haskett. It's entirely up to you——"

Pure instinct prompted Wilbur's instant disclaimer. It was not in his nature to accept such a statement without challenge.

"I don't see that, sir. It seems to me that it's up to the whole organization. The sales department's only one branch of the business. We can't sell unless we get the right lines of goods; we can't sell them even then unless they're priced right, nor unless we get efficient co-operation from the credit department. Sales policy depends on all those things. I think—" he saw a fresh egress opening before him—"I think that was Mr. Larner's big difficulty. He tried to formulate his own schemes without consulting the other departments——"

"That's true enough. He stirred up a hornets' nest every morning. I hadn't thought

of it in just that light, though. Then you think——”

“I think that selling’s up to the whole organization, sir. I think they all ought to be consulted about it—invited to suggest things——”

Thurlow slapped his thigh. “I’ve got it! What we need here is a sort of conference scheme —have all the department heads meet every day for a talk over their troubles, exchange and discuss ideas, shake together into a united body! I ought to have started it long ago. You’re perfectly right—everybody in the plant has a certain share of selling to do and ought to have a voice in the selection of selling methods. I’ll get them together right after lunch. That’s a first-rate idea, Haskett——”

“Oh, it’s your idea, sir. I only told you what was wrong. You thought of the remedy.”

Wilbur spoke quickly. Thurlow wasn’t going to fix responsibility for the innovation on him! He’d make it clear from the first that the scheme was none of his. The president chuckled.

“Well, maybe I did. We won’t quarrel over the glory till we see how it works. But I think it will.”

Wilbur escaped, immensely relieved. With a

regular daily conference to consult, he could shift most of his depressing burdens to the joint strength of the organization.

He foresaw that he would be gladly relieved of the worst job of all—inventing, originating. Larner's friction with McIlhenny and Torbitt and the others had arisen less from his intrusions on their respective provinces than from his impatient rejection of their attempts to intrude on his. McIlhenny was convinced that he knew more about selling than he did about costs; Torbitt maintained that only a man trained in the science of passing on credits could possibly understand the true art of salesmanship.

These two would be fertile sources of originality. There would be no need for Wilbur Haskett to invent. And the conference would also spare him the need of rejecting impossible schemes. He could rely on Thomas Thurlow and the rest to act as balance wheels on excessive enthusiasm.

Suddenly it came to him that by merely centering his intelligence and energy on such evasions, he could not only minimize the unpleasant features of his new importance, but continue undisturbed in its profits for a considerable period. Of course, in the end, they would find him out, but in the meantime

he would enjoy his increased pay, his improved status in men's sight, with relatively little of the detested business of deciding things for himself.

The idea burned happily in him. For once, it seemed, his advantage marched hand in hand with his inclination. He set himself, behind a desk cleared of its litter of trivialities magnificently transferred to Miss Carston's gratified capability, to devise new means of passing the buck so deftly as to deceive the clumsy eye.

For the first time in his experience business presented the aspect of amusement. It was going to be something like a game, he thought—a game which he was predestined to lose, in the end, but in the playing of which there was immediate profit and pleasure.

From the outset the conference justified its creators. Wilbur, skulking as unobtrusively as possible in a background of attentive silence, contrived to put his own problems to vote in such fashion as to acquit him of even a deliberative part in their solution. And by abstaining from taking sides, he discovered an increasing popularity in which there was a perceptible tinge of respect. As if in return for his reverential acceptance of Torbitt's views on selling, he was invited to express

opinions on certain nice questions of credit, and these, when adopted, became Torbitt's responsibilities, not Wilbur's.

"If I were you—" The phrase fitted pleasantly on his lips and left him cheerfully free of any share of answerability for what followed. He *wasn't* Torbitt. What he might or might not have done in the event of an exchange of identities with the credit manager was purely in the field of speculation. He was conscious of an increasing security.

Also, even a less percipient eye than his would have observed an improvement in the affairs of the Thurlow Clock Works. The effect of the conferences was swiftly manifest in a smoother co-ordination between departments. Even Werfer, the thin-skinned Swiss who ruled the factory and who could overawe Thurlow himself by exploding in an effervescent fury when outsiders meddled with his preserves, yielded to the weight of a majority opinion against him. Under pressure he consented to the discontinuance of some of his petted models on which there had ceased to be a visible profit. Under duress he withdrew his opposition to some of the novelties for which the road-men pleaded in every letter.

"We're shaking together," said Thurlow. He looked younger, Wilbur thought. Twice, lately, he had taken an afternoon for golf. He dropped a hand on Wilbur's shoulder.

"You've begun well, son. That conference idea was just what we needed."

Wilbur said nothing. It wasn't necessary to shift the fatherhood of the conference, now. It stood too firmly to offer any possibilities of reproach.

"But you've only begun." Wilbur frowned at the wall. More trouble! "This new spirit is a good thing, but it won't save us. We've got to find something better yet. The other fellows keep right on cutting in. We're losing ground steadily. I'm counting on you to find the way to get it back, Haskett."

Wilbur shrugged. Worse and worse. For a moment he wished that he had refused the promotion at the beginning. No sooner did he get himself safely past one ordeal of decision than another was thrust upon him.

"I'm too close to it, myself," said Thurlow. "I'm near-sighted, so to speak. I didn't see that conference idea, obvious as it was, till you suggested it. Now you——"

Wilbur saw light. Just as Mr. Thurlow sought to shift the burden to him, so could he pass it on with the same excuse.

"We're all near-sighted, sir. What we need is an outside view altogether. Why not get it? Put the whole thing up to somebody who isn't so close to our everyday problems?"

Thurlow reflected. "It might help. But who?"

Wilbur meditated. "Get some good advertising agency to come up and look things over. They ought to have a sort of bird's-eye view, oughtn't they?"

Thurlow stiffened at the word. He detested the whole scheme of publicity, root and branch. A proper self-respect, he maintained, forbade a man from flaunting his name and wares in the public eye, like a wayside hawker. "I'm a manufacturer, not a huckster," he was fond of informing the occasional solicitors who reached his presence.

"Out of the question," he snapped. "When I get down to that level I'll put up the shutters——"

"I didn't mean to recommend advertising itself," said Wilbur hastily. "I thought—there are plenty of agencies who are more like sales-experts than advertisers. We could hire one of 'em to go

over our lay-out and see if there's anything we can do. It looks sensible to me. They see the inside of dozens of businesses. We only know one."

"There's something in that," said the president, thoughtfully. "Yes. It might help. We'll try it, anyway. I'll write—no, you do it—"

"Excuse me, sir. But we'll get better service if they feel, from the first, that they're dealing with the man at the top."

Wilbur ducked and sidestepped without a conscious effort, now. He was perfecting his technique with every added day's experience.

"That's true, too." Thurlow nodded. "You've got a level head, Haskett. And a pretty hard one, too."

Wilbur accepted the tribute modestly. You could certainly get away with it, he informed himself. If you were sufficiently quick about it, the very people to whom you passed the buck would regard it as a favour, a new proof of your sagacity.

His experience with the amazingly alert gentleman who presently appeared in behalf of the Marny Agency confirmed this conviction. Mr. Gerrish clearly enjoyed the process of receiving bucks from people who didn't care for them.

"It's refreshing to find a sales manager who

doesn't know it all and then some," he confided to Wilbur, over an intimate lunch-table. "You don't act as if I were up here to put skids under you. You give a fellow a free hand."

"Go as far as you like," said Wilbur cordially. "The blue sky is your limit, for all me."

Thus, when Mr. Gerrish read his typewritten findings to the assembled conference, Wilbur was constrained to blush and wriggle under sundry references to himself and his conduct of his department which were as patently sincere as they were undeserved. The gist of the report was simple.

"You've got a first-class line of goods at fair prices. Your credit policy is liberal and sound; you have a satisfactory system of buying, and your cost figures are accurate. Your factory is highly efficient, your labour well-treated and contented. I see only one serious defect. You lack anything in the nature of a leader—a specialty which can carry the rest of your line on its back."

Gerrish paused and ran an eye impressively around the group. There were nods of assent. Wilbur reserved judgment. He saw no reason in premature self-committal, and he was, as usual, quite undecided in which direction to commit himself.

"Every one of your competitors has one or several specialties which they use as entering wedges. The Northern, for instance——"

They listened to a familiar catalogue, nodding.

"My conclusion is that you can follow this example successfully. I am not a clock man, and my agency has had no close experience in that branch of business, so that I do not venture a suggestion as to the nature of the leader which you might select. That is for you to discover, out of your greater and closer knowledge of your field."

Wilbur concealed a grin. Mr. Gerrish, he perceived, had learned a little of his system. This was passing the buck straight back whence it had started. But he observed that those who received it were artlessly unaware of the fact. Gerrish wound up his address with a diplomatic reference to advertising. If the Thurlow Clock Works evolved a suitable speciality, susceptible of profiting from conservative, rational publicity, he and his agency would be happy to go into that question.

He departed in an atmosphere of reluctant approval. Not for nothing had Mr. Gerrish ascertained the prejudices of Thomas Thurlow before beginning his investigations. His careful

abstinence from solicitation placed him well up in that gentleman's regard.

The conference, in executive session, confirmed the Gerrish report. The Thurlow Works needed a leader. It remained to fix upon one. Here opinions divagated. There were several tart exchanges between Messrs. Torbitt and Werfer; Thurlow, pouring oil on rising waters, turned to Wilbur.

"Let's hear from the sales department, please."

Wilbur wagged his head. "I'm not ready to talk, yet." He spoke impressively, as one who shelters a mighty secret. "I don't believe in jumping at an idea. We can't afford to guess wrong, about this."

Even Torbitt admitted the force of this observe.

"I don't like guessing, anyway," pursued Wilbur carefully. "And that's what it amounts to—sitting here and choosing a leader. None of us really knows how any clock may affect the public." He felt firmer ground below him. "Before I suggest anything I'm going to test it out—on the people who'd actually buy or refuse to buy the goods. That's slower, but it's a lot safer."

"Perfectly right," said Thomas Thurlow. "We'll adjourn this meeting. Same time

tomorrow." He glanced at Wilbur. "Be ready then?"

"I may," said Wilbur, cautiously. He went out regretting his course. He'd let himself in for it, now. When he appeared tomorrow, empty-handed, they'd see through his shams. Well, it didn't matter very much. A job where a fellow had to be straining his mind with weighty decisions all the time wasn't the place for Wilbur Haskett, anyway.

IV

"Let me think," said Cynthia, superfluously. Wilbur was patently willing to countenance the process. She drew her distinct eyebrows together. "You don't want to imitate other people, of course. You want something distinctive and different and new."

"Yes." Wilbur nodded gravely. Shifting his immediate problem to Cynthia's acquiescent mind relieved him briefly of its burden, but he was not sanguine of results.

"And yet it mustn't be freakish," she pursued. "You want something with a real value—something that lots of people will want and keep on wanting. Let me think."

She thought, visibly, for several seconds. Watching her, Wilbur once more revised his opinions of her appearance. She was getting better looking every day, he thought.

"Anything in the way of a fancy clock wouldn't do, then," she argued. "Tastes vary too much.

What you want is something that almost everybody could use—like an alarm-clock, for instance."

"Everybody makes them," he objected. "That's the most crowded field in the business."

"Yes." She nodded. "I see that." Another interval of meditation. "But—but they're all so—so obvious. Even the nice-looking ones are just alarm-clocks—you can tell the minute you look at them what they're for—"

"Yes." He smiled tolerantly. A woman's objection! Why shouldn't an alarm-clock reveal itself honestly for what it was? After all, it was a utilitarian affair—not a decoration—

She clapped her hands sharply. "I've got it! I've got it, Wilbur!" She sprang up, vanished. He heard her feet on the stair. Returning she showed him a little bureau-clock, finished in imitation ivory and ornamented with her monogram. The Thurlow plant turned out thousands like it, every year.

"Why couldn't you make a clock like this with an alarm system in it? Then a girl who likes pretty things on her bureau could use it to wake up by. I——"

"Alarm clocks are built for men," he objected.

"And men don't care for pretty little dew dabs——"

"Yes. But women do. And women have to wake up, just as often and just as early as men." She nodded emphasis. "Married women have to wake up earlier," she enlarged, with a touch of filial partisanship. Wilbur had an enlightening vision of the impressive George Graydon, undergoing the process of awakening at the instance of Cynthia's even more impressive mother. "And I read somewhere that there are more than five million self-supporting women in the country—they need alarm-clocks just as much as men, and most of them would rather have a—a woman's kind of clock. Why don't you try catering to that field, instead of following in other people's footprints?"

Wilbur was impressed. "It looks possible," he conceded. "I—I'll take it up with the rest of 'em, anyway."

He listened absently to her eager amplifications of the idea, his doubts lessening. There was something in it. He knew that the mechanical problem could be solved, easily enough. The Thurlow Works already made clocks no larger than Cynthia's with alarm-trains compactly stowed in

them. They made clocks with much the same style of case and design. Yes, it would be worth while offering the suggestion, anyway.

He followed his natural bent, next morning, by a canny preparation of the way for his suggestion. He visited the other departments one by one, broaching Cynthia's idea diplomatically, so that his auditor must be dull indeed if he did not anticipate the climax of the proposal. Torbitt and McIlhenny and even Werfer himself were each convinced, when Wilbur departed, that they had helped to originate his scheme. In the conference, therefore, it appeared as the joint invention, opposition stifled in advance.

Wilbur, concealing his own intermediacy as far as possible, breathed easily as it was agreed that the factory should make up some samples, that costs and profits might be determined and a selling-price fixed on the basis of these, that the salesmen be consulted when the models were already on exhibition. Thomas Thurlow stopped Wilbur in the corridor.

"That was clever, son, mighty clever. I didn't think you had it in you. Good work!"

Wilbur wriggled uneasily, affected innocence.

"Oh, you can't fool me. I know it was all your

notion. None of those fellows is capable of getting an idea like that. But I didn't mean the idea itself. I meant the way you sold 'em on it, beforehand—I spotted you, this morning, making your rounds. You let each of 'em think he thought of it first. That's real brains, Haskett. Most men would have wanted all the credit, and we'd have spent the afternoon answering objections. You're a diplomat. That was great—great!"

Wilbur went back to his desk, grinning. He would have preferred to avoid the credit, but since it was inevitable, he was entertained by the comedy of Mr. Thurlow's misconception. Actually he was being praised for sidestepping the detested initiative, slipping from under his just responsibilities! It was funny. But the crisis had been once more deferred. It was like a game, more than ever. He almost enjoyed playing it.

It was easy enough to keep in the background of later developments. The salesmen unitedly welcomed the new clock. The office and factory approved of it no less cordially. There remained only the trade and the public to be persuaded. Wilbur mechanically prepared his own plans for this, without any deep confidence. The little lady alarm-clocks had lifted him safely past a

threatening situation, but he hardly hoped that they would accomplish much more. Presently he would face issues which no amount of shiftiness could evade. Then his pretensions would be perceived and the just penalty exacted of him. He was still willing that this should happen, although a growing fondness for the material aspects of his estate had had the effect of weakening his distaste for its demands and obligations.

His forebodings were partly justified. The salesmen reported a puzzling lack of progress. The trade preferred to hold back from new things, they said, subjoining scornful comment on this conservatism in token of their own fearlessly progressive spirits. A few small orders sifted across Wilbur's desk, lost in the adverse reports. He waited, resigned to disaster but no longer actually hoping for it.

It was pleasant to have a little more money than he needed, to wear better clothes, to indulge more liberally in the amusements which attracted him. He felt that he would regret this prosperity when he reverted to the penury of his other days. Still, it couldn't be helped. He sensed the sword of Damocles above his neck. A mere question of time. He had passed his buck as far as it would go.

"They all say it needs advertising," wrote Walden, from Chicago. "Won't touch it unless we sell it for them—the boobs!"

Thomas Thurlow, looking older and more worried than ever, read the report, sitting beside Wilbur's desk. He shook his head.

"I suppose they're right. Times have changed, Haskett. A man has to bang a drum, nowadays, or nobody pays any attention to him. I'd advertise, fast enough, if I could."

Wilbur lifted interrogating brows. What prevented Thomas Thurlow from following his own desires?

"The fact is we can't afford it. I—I had a talk with your father and Graydon, today. I'd made up my mind to risk a campaign if they'd let me have the money. But they won't. I don't blame them. They've carried a pretty heavy line for us, and the statement looks worse every time I have to show it."

Wilbur clicked sympathetically. This was the sort of thing he might expect, if he kept on climbing! Suppose he reached the dizzy level of president, some day? It would only mean looking and feeling as Thomas Thurlow did. He shook his head. Not for Wilbur Haskett. Better obscur-

ity, with an easy mind, than to sit in the seats of the mighty.

"If we could get a few orders, without advertising, or advertise without waiting for orders," continued Thurlow, "I honestly believe we'd pull out of the woods. This new clock is a winner. It's an untouched field—millions and millions of women just waiting to be told about it. But we can't sell the clocks without advertising; we can't advertise without money; we can't raise the money unless we can sell the clocks."

Mechanically Wilbur passed the buck. "Let's send for Gerrish. Maybe he can think of something."

Gerrish came, listened, sympathized. "What you want is something to show your bank," he declared. "They can't visualize. We'll work out some good copy and designs and a sound plan of attack, and then put it up to them again."

Duly the results appeared—beautiful advertisements which overbore even the lingering prejudices of Thomas Thurlow. They were dignified, without being tame, convincing without blatancy, insidious in their appeal to eye and reason alike. Wilbur, against his wish, accompanied Thurlow and Gerrish to the bank.

His father was non-committal. Graydon, jingling keys in a trouser-pocket, regarded the designs and listened to the projected attack in a mood obviously divided.

"I'd like to do it, Tom," he said, at length. "This all looks good—fine. But you know I'm not loaning my own money. I can't take chances. And we're carrying you now for—well, I don't dare increase your line, and that's the long and short of it."

He jingled the keys again. "Why don't you put it up to the trade, instead of me? Take those ads. out and let your customers see 'em. Tell 'em you'll agree to run the advertising if they'll give you orders conditioned on your doing it. Then bring us the orders and we'll put up the money, fast enough."

Wilbur, carefully fixing his eyes on the wall, struggled against a grin. Even George Graydon wasn't above slipping out from under troublesome decisions! As an expert in the art and science of passing the buck, Wilbur paid tribute to the deftness with which the banker accomplished it here. But to Gerrish and Thurlow this seemed unrevealed.

"There's sense in that," conceded the agency man.

"Sounds so to me," said Thurlow. "We'll try it."

Wilbur repressed a chuckle. He caught his father's eye, fixed on him with an uncertain reluctant pride. His own relief at the new postponement of trouble was deepened as he realized that Martin Haskett was enjoying his son's apparent reform, was pleased and proud in his semblance of success. It almost made him wish that his father wasn't going to be disappointed, presently, when the truth was revealed. It laid upon him a new and vexing sense of obligation, of responsibility.

He took comfort in the reflection that his destiny now lay entirely in the hands of others. If the advertising was good, if the salesmen presented it effectively, if the trade manifested a becoming attitude of conviction—in any case it was no longer up to Wilbur Haskett himself.

Experiment proved discouraging. The salesmen, armed with advertising samples and data and conditional order-forms, reported an undiminished resistance.

"They all say they'll stock the new clock if we make a demand for it," was the refrain of the letters. "They won't touch it till they're sure, even on this conditional basis."

Wilbur was depressed without surprise. He accepted this state of affairs as predestined. But he foresaw the effect upon himself with a genuine displeasure. His father wouldn't look at him with that queer glimmer in his eyes, when he had lost this job. Cynthia wouldn't treat him with her new and exhilarating respect; he wouldn't have a comfortably filled pocket. And he felt, too, a growing compassion for Thomas Thurlow, as he observed the president's deepening evidences of discouragement. It must be a hard thing to watch a fine old business go to pot, and carry you down with it, when you're old.

There were times when Wilbur Haskett heartily wished that he were different—that he could do something better than just passing on the buck. But, as he drove his unwilling mind toward the problem, his old habit held him fast. It would be easier, safer, wiser, to put this thing up to somebody else.

On impulse he stopped in to talk to Wally Bleistein, a schoolmate now engaged in rejuvenating what had once been a thriving loan establishment, and had become, under Wally's management, a promising young jewellery business.

"What's wrong with you fellows, Wally? Why

won't you string along with us and put this new clock across?"

Wally spread his hands in a persistent ancestral gesture.

"Why should I take a chance? I don't know it's a winner, do I? If it goes across I can easy buy what I want. If it don't, I don't have a case or two of stickers in my storeroom."

This was incontestable. Wilbur was silent

"I let the other fellow do my gambling," confided Wally. "Me, I wait till I see where the cat jumps—every time."

Wilbur detected the familiar philosophy. It hadn't occurred to him that Wally, the successful, steel-skulled Wally Bleistein, was as given to evading issues as Wilbur Haskett himself.

"You pass the buck, eh?"

"You bet I do! Look at it sensible, Wilbur—I know some about this business but do I know it all? Not! I make mistakes. Every man makes 'em. But the whole trade don't. When the trade says a certain article is right, then it is right. One of us goes wrong, maybe, but ten thousand—uhm-hmph!" He wagged a wise head.

Wilbur pondered this. "Then, if the rest of the

trade signed these conditional orders of ours, you'd feel safe, eh?"

Wally nodded. "Safe, yes. But still I wait. Why? Because there ain't any reason for me to put in an order till I see the demand. Why should I tie up? I could wait just as well as not——"

Wilbur saw the force of this. The trade, as typified by Wally Bleistein, declined to receive the buck. That was all there was to it. But Wally lowered his voice confidentially and leaned on his counter

"Suppose, now, you make it worth my while to order ahead, that's something else again. You give me an inside figger, maybe. Then I sign up —if the rest say it's O. K. Otherwise not."

Wilbur surrounded this idea slowly. He walked back to the office, digesting it. Suppose they recast the prices to allow of a special, introductory discount, as a reward for those who signed up in advance? That would tempt in even the wary Bleistein. And, if Bleistein signed the order, his signature would serve to persuade somebody else . . . "one of us goes wrong, maybe, but not ten thousand!" Suppose—suppose— He found himself running down the corridor toward Thurlow's office, the scheme suddenly full-fledged in his brain.

"You see, sir, they're all—all anxious to put it up to somebody else. Let's let 'em do it! We'll just change this order blank to read that it's conditioned on our selling say sixty per cent. of our trade—and selling a certain definite number of clocks. If we do that, we go ahead and advertise, and the orders are valid. If we don't, we don't advertise, don't make the clocks, even, and it's all off. That lets every dealer pass the buck to every other one, see? And by offering a special price to those who sign up on that basis, we give 'em a reason for not waiting—we could call it a reward for helping us play absolutely safe. It'll work, Mr. Thurlow! I know it'll work! Everybody's a buckpasser, at heart! Look at us! We wear the same kind of clothes the other fellow wears—and he's wearing 'em because we do! We read the same books he does—*because* he does—go to the same shows, buy the same cars, build the same houses—all because we're buckpassers, because we're convinced that the other fellow knows more than we do! Why, when you think of it, every human institution is built on passing the buck—political parties, fashions, architecture—everything. Look at this very problem of ours: we tried to pass it on to Gerrish; he passes it on

to the trade and the trade passes it back to us. We put it up to the bank and they hand it along to the trade again! It goes round and round in a circle! But this scheme harnesses us up to it, instead of making us fight it. We encourage every customer to slip the buck to every other one. And they'll do it—they'll eat it up, sir!"

Thurlow's face brightened gradually. "I guess you're right, Haskett. I—I've got a weakness for letting the other fellow do my thinking, myself. That's what I liked about you—you showed me how I could divide up my responsibilities among the lot of you, with that conference scheme. How—what made you see all this? I don't see where you got your notion——"

Wilbur yielded to an impulse of confession. He leaned forward.

"It's just because I've always been a buckpasser myself," he said. "Only I never realized before today that it wasn't a special, private disgrace of my own. I've been trying to get over it——" he laughed. "Never again! Why, it's the whole secret of everything——"

"I shouldn't wonder," said Thomas Thurlow. "And while we're at it, I'll indulge myself a little more. Call up Fletcher and get the new order

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forms under way. Wire the road men to stop quoting the old price till further notice. And do anything else you think of. I'll leave it all to you!"

V

SIMULTANEOUSLY Wilbur Haskett confronted a disturbing realization and a spectacle which made coherent cerebration increasingly difficult.

The realization concerned his new philosophy, the doctrine which had rehabilitated the Thurlow Clock Works and lifted Wilbur Haskett himself, with almost the rapidity of a modern elevator, to heights of affluence and importance from which, before his enlightenment, he would have recoiled in dizzy horror.

For nearly ten months he had regarded it as an all-sufficient system of existence. His faith in it had steadily intensified under a succession of convincing proofs. The secret of achievement, he firmly believed, was to pass the buck as expeditiously and skilfully as one might. And he realized, now, that he had been mistaken. Sound and broad as was his system, it was not adequate to all problems. It failed here, in his greatest need.

The same spectacle which was rapidly rendering him incapable of rational thought was bringing home to him the existence of this problem, impressing him with its imperative need of a solution.

He tried, weakly, to remove his glance, so that his attention might concentrate on a question which no one but Wilbur Haskett could answer, but his eyes refused to obey. They clung stubbornly to a silhouette against a young moon peering amiably through swaying masses of leafage; they observed the elusive play of this sifted radiance in soft, alluring hair; they were aware of the white, gossamer caress of a frock spun of cobwebs and starbeams. It was impossible to think, when such absurd, lyric figures of speech crowded into a fellow's mind.

And yet Wilbur knew that he must think. This thing had to be settled. He couldn't keep on putting it off. Every time it became harder to evade it. He'd simply got to make up his mind.

Make up his mind! He hated it, and all it connoted, more than ever, now that he no longer regarded it as an unattainable and Lacedæmonian virtue. Making up your mind was not only

unpleasant—it was needless, silly, even harmful. You might so easily make it up wrong!

And a matter of such transcendental import as this—a decision which would affect and govern a fellow's whole life, stretch out its ramifying consequences into distant generations . . . he felt himself flushing at the thought, for all the shadows, and resolutely drew away from it. He needn't worry about any one more remote than himself. That was quite enough of a problem, without complicating it. A mistake here and now, in the dappling moonlight, might wreck all his years beyond repair. It was awful to think of it—to know that alone, unaided, he must choose blindly between veiled futures—risking everything on a mere difference between speech and silence.

And yet it had to be done. He must decide, now—this very moment. Either he must commit himself irretrievably to the course which, merely contemplated, thrilled him with an ecstatic agony of hopes and fears, or he must put the idea sternly out of his mind for ever. He couldn't go on like this—not another instant. The torture of indecision was worse than the pang of resolution.

While his eyes clung more tightly than ever to

the cause of this inner conflict, his mind searched frantically for escape from the menacing horns of the dilemma. Always, till now, there had been a way out of such impasses. There must be an escape here—there must be somebody to whom this could be referred.

He fingered a coin in his pocket. He might even leave it to the blind arbitrament of head and tail. But he rejected the thought. Chance was even blinder than Wilbur Haskett. This thing needed intelligence, logic, reason, forevision. If only there were somebody to decide—somebody who *knew*—

Suddenly light flamed in on him. He laughed at the blindness which had tormented him so long, so needlessly. The secret was still unmarred by any exception; life was still soluble at will by the simple magic of passing the buck! He leaned forward, eagerly.

“Cynthia—” he cleared his throat—“Cynthia, I want to get your opinion about—about something. What would you think of—of marrying me—?”

There was a breathless moment. And then, out of the moon-mist and shadow, Cynthia’s voice came to him.

"I'd adore it," she said, "if—if you're sure you want me."

It was long afterward that he realized that the buck had returned to his keeping. But by that time it did not matter.

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